Information suppression

Information suppression is a set of actions to silence information with the purpose of muting dissenting voices or narratives within and outside a country's borders, serving the interest of strengthening a regime's grip on power.

Information is power

Information has always been a key tool in politics, for both democratic and authoritarian regimes. Today the need to control the production, dissemination and salience of information has intensified with the internet. In tandem with traditional transnational repression, authoritarian regimes employ sophisticated online tools to advance their domestic and global political interests.

A key strategy of information manipulation is information suppression. By silencing dissenting voices, discouraging activist practices, and defusing counternarratives, regimes aim to strengthen their power, undermining fundamental rights to information access and freedom of expression. Recognising this, we offer a clear conceptualisation of information suppression and propose effective strategies to understand and counteract it.

The European context

Growing concerns over potential security risks and threats to fundamental rights posed by authoritarian states' transnational activities have prompted the European Union to prioritise the work against Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) – understood as predominantly legal behaviours that may negatively affect values, procedures, and political processes. It is characterised as intentional, coordinated manipulation by both state and non-state actors, including proxies within and beyond their borders.

This definition of FIMI is often narrowed down to only one aspect of information manipulation - that of active and deliberate promotion of false or misleading information. The deliberate suppression of information is rarely addressed. A clearer focus on information suppression could enable the EU to better protect critical global values, reflected in the UN Sustainable Development Goal 16.10 on ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms.

Key Messages

- Information suppression aims to mute dissenting voices both at home and abroad.

- Offline information suppression must be explored to fully understand FIMI.

- Information suppression is not always the eradication of information.

- Information suppression is not always a deliberate state policy.

- Non-state actors are also responsible for information suppression.

- Diaspora groups are both agents and targets of information suppression.

- Context is central to the forming of policies against FIMI.

How to define information suppression?

Our preliminary findings suggest that existing literature has not yet addressed information suppression exclusively and explicitly. Some concepts close to the suppression of information have been defined, such as censorship and propaganda, and have shaped our definition of information suppression.

Censorship

The restriction of public expression or of public access to information by authority when the information is thought to have the capacity to undermine the authority by making it accountable to the public.[1]

Through censorship, both expression and access of information is restricted. This involves both traditional media censorship – shutting down, regulating or restaffing newspapers and other media outlets[2] – and online censorship. The latter offers a more centralised, low cost, and responsive way of controlling information, opening up for simultaneous censorship of individuals and media outlets. Offline repression or the threat of it, is done to deter activists from posting online, underlining the interplay between online and offline censorship.

Propaganda

Manipulating or misleading a target population by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences to obtain behaviour compliant with the political goals of the propagandist.[3]

Propaganda has traditionally been seen to push information, not suppress it. Yet it can distract a population into paying less attention to another subject, thereby suppressing information around it. The distraction will then lead people to lose the capacity to develop a politically informed opinion.[4] Propaganda can also disorientate – making it impossible for audiences to tell the truth from the non-truth. The aim is not necessarily to convince people, but to leave them in confusion and passivity.[5]

Definition

Information suppression is a set of actions to silence information with the purpose of muting dissenting voices or narratives within and outside a country's borders, serving the interest of strengthening a regime's grip on power.

- **It is intentional, serving the interest of the preserving power. However, this does not mean that information suppression is always coordinated or coerced from above.**

- **It is transnational, highlighting the link between domestic and global tactics of information suppression, with diaspora groups as both agents and targets.[6]**

1. Roberts, M. (2018) Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall Princeton University Press, p. 37)
2. Gohdes, A. (2024) Repression in the digital age. Surveillance, censorship and the dynamics of state violence Oxford: Oxford University Press
3. Benkler, Y., R. Rais, and H. Roberts. (2018) Network Propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American Politics Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 29
4. Benkler et.al. 2018, p.35
5. Pomerantsev, quoted in Benkler et.al 2018
6. These features are also highlighted in European External Action Services' definition of FIMI. See EEAS (2023) '1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats' www.eeas.europa.eu
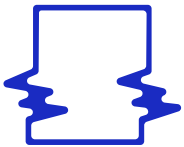
Understanding information suppression

Investigating information suppression is complicated, as actors have a strong interest in keeping their actions secret. Our approach helps to overcome this challenge by unpacking it to make it legible and understandable. We place suppression strategies within the following spheres: **information production**, **information dissemination**, and **information salience**. All spheres reach across borders, underlining the link between domestic and foreign information suppression.

1. Suppressing information production

Actors suppress the production of information by targeting either individuals or professionals within the media and academic sphere, or human rights defenders, affecting freedom of expression by the following means:

- **Legal deterrence, introducing laws that prohibit the discussion of certain topics, or defamation laws.**

- **Extra-legal intimidation, harassment and threats towards public figures, journalists, and academics who are assumed to be able to influence large groups of citizens. This is to induce fear, to deter them from distributing, analysing, or collecting certain types of information.**

- **Making the collection of primary information difficult by restricting access to public statistics and archives, or declining visas for researchers.**

2. Suppressing information dissemination

Information dissemination can be suppressed by closing down traditional and online news outlets, internet shutdowns, and targeting private businesses by regulating/restricting digital technology companies. This corresponds with censorship as friction - diverting the media and individuals away from censored information, making certain facts, data, social media posts, news articles or books difficult to obtain. Common measures of restricting information dissemination are:

- **Limiting the reach of TV or radio, or the availability of newspapers.**

- **Blocking websites, either permanently or temporarily or throttling websites to make access slow.**

- **Blocking certain keywords in online searches, or reordering searches, burying sensitive webpages.**

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3. Suppressing information salience

Suppressing information salience includes targeting the visibility or impact of certain information, through burying information, or through the promotion of social norms on what should be talked about and not. The former is akin to a form of information suppression known as flooding,[7] creating distractions that heighten the relative costs of accessing competing (sensitive) information, or the coordinated production of information by an authority with the intent of competing with or distracting from information the authority would rather citizens not access. Reducing the salience of information can be done in different ways:

- **Directly by an authority, when a government directly floods the information system with traditional propaganda.**
- **By providing pre-packaged information to volunteer social media armies, or state-run news agencies.**
- **Through traditional media, where the authorities oblige newspapers of TV stations to write positive news to make the negative events less salient.**
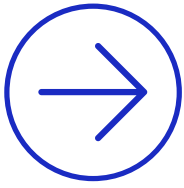
4. Cross-border information suppression

Information suppression must be understood as a product of both domestic and transnational activities. For FIMI actors, the aim of domestic politics and foreign policy is the same – to contain dissent, sustain power and deter democracy. Transnational repression perspectives, focussing on how authoritarian regimes strive to control diasporas outside their borders, are helpful in understanding this relationship. The following aspects should be taken into account when investigating information suppression across borders:

- **Information suppression is part of authoritarian states' repertoire of transnational repression.**
- **Diasporas, even if not defined as such by these groups themselves but conceived by authoritarian states as their diasporas, should be seen as particularly important groups, both as targets and actors of information suppression.**
- **The exploration of information suppression should however have a broader focus than conventional transnational repression – including actors beyond the diaspora, such as activists, journalists, academics, and business actors.**

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7.   Roberts 2018

When developing policies:

- **Consider offline aspects.** Virtual suppression and in-person suppression are often entangled and difficult to separate, with online intimidation leading to self-censorship in the public space, in-person suppression leading to online self-censorship.

- **Regard flooding as information suppression.** The production of distracting or competing information is not only a matter of disinformation. It could also be about burying or suppressing information.

- **Look beyond state authorities.** Digital vigilantes and volunteers, and popular social norms and cultural practices play an important role in deciding what information should be suppressed or freely distributed.

- **Avoid labelling of diasporas as threats.** Labelling can ultimately endanger their civil and political rights, thereby challenging the original objective of fighting FIMI – to ensure fundamental rights for all.

- **Pay attention to the wider societal context in which information suppression is implemented,** echoing the quest for a society-wide strategy against FIMI.

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About the ARM Project
Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

Analysing Russia, China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, ARM conceptualises and addresses different forms of FIMI. The project will explore the extent that major global players like China and Russia, alongside Ethiopia and Rwanda, engage in transnational information suppression, particularly targeting European diaspora communities.

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