Twitter Thread by Rob Henderson



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The common understanding of propaganda is that it is intended to brainwash the masses. Supposedly, people get exposed to the same message repeatedly and over time come to believe in whatever nonsense authoritarians want them to believe /1

And yet authoritarians often broadcast silly, unpersuasive propaganda.

Political scientist Haifeng Huang writes that the purpose of propaganda is not to brainwash people, but to instill fear in them /2 https://t.co/KDnqnccVaQ

> "propaganda is often not used for indoctrination, but rather to signal the government\u2019s strength in being able to afford significant resources and impose on its citizens...not meant to 'brainwash', but rather to forewarn the society about how strong it is" https://t.co/mFAurhEHeO pic.twitter.com/WXKKJaPqWQ
>
> — Rob Henderson (@robkhenderson) June 18, 2020

When people are bombarded with propaganda everywhere they look, they are reminded of the strength of the regime.

The vast amount of resources authoritarians spend to display their message in every corner of the public square is a costly demonstration of their power /3

In fact, the overt silliness of authoritarian propaganda is part of the point. Propaganda is designed to be silly so that people can instantly recognize it when they see it https://t.co/mZmY8ZvHeB

> Authoritarians do not use propaganda for brainwashing, "but to demonstrate their strength in social control...propaganda may need to be dull and unpersuasive, to make sure citizens know it is propaganda when they see it and hence get the implicit message" https://t.co/PqRpxjaIPL pic.twitter.com/1y67d2RCjB
>
> — Rob Henderson (@robkhenderson) June 19, 2020

Propaganda is intended to instill fear in people, not brainwash them.

The message is: You might not believe in pro-regime values or attitudes. But we will make sure you are too frightened to do

anything about it.

China’s primetime news program, Xinwen Lianbo, is stilted, archaic, and is “a constant target of mockery among ordinary citizens.”

Yet the Chinese government airs it every night at 7pm sharp. To remind citizens of the strength and reach of the communist party

The willingness of authoritarians to undertake costly endeavors to broadcast unpersuasive messages is a credible signal of just how powerful it is

Political ads work similarly. They almost never change anyone’s mind. The function of political ads, though, isn’t to persuade. It’s to “burn money” in a public way

They are costly signals of the political campaign’s willingness to expend resources. A demonstration of commitment

Prof. Huang found that Chinese citizens who were more knowledgeable about propaganda messages were not more satisfied w/the government. They weren't brainwashed

But they were less willing to express dissent and more likely to say the government was strong https://t.co/XAHwlHGl1h

> "Students with more exposure to ideological and political propaganda are not more satisfied with the state, but they are more likely to believe that the state is strong, and are less willing to engage in political dissent" https://t.co/HnklCmxzR7 pic.twitter.com/OeLwbHR5Rq
>
> — Rob Henderson (@robkhenderson) June 19, 2020

The message from authoritarians is "Yes, we know this message is tiresome and obviously false. But we show this to you to tell you that helpless to do anything about it."

People are more likely to rebel against a regime when they sense that it is vulnerable. By broadcasting a consistent message repeatedly, the state broadcasts its power

A weak organization can’t produce such messages. They can’t expend the resources. A strong organization can play the same program every night on all networks. They can broadcast the same message on every website and advertisement and television series.

As Huang puts it, “citizens can make inferences about the type of government by observing whether it is willing to produce a high level of propaganda, even if the propaganda itself is not believed by citizens.” https://t.co/ZXzgT9TpGC

produce. After observing the government's level of propaganda, citizens decide whether or not to launch a rebellion. Crucially, the cost of producing the same amount of propaganda is lower for a strong government than for a weak government. In other words, a government that is strong and more capable in social control can maintain a propaganda

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apparatus, carry out propaganda activities, and impose the messages on citizens more easily and efficiently than a weak government.

This means that citizens can make inferences about the type of the government by observing whether it is willing to produce a high level of propaganda, even if the content of the propaganda itself is not believed by the citizens. I show that there is a unique separating equilibrium in this game: a strong government produces a sufficiently high level of propaganda that a weak government is unwilling or unable to produce and, therefore, distinguishes itself from the latter. Citizens are then deterred from rebellion when they observe a sufficiently high level of propaganda not because it induces a more positive view of the government but because they now know that the government has a strong capacity for defeating a rebellion and maintaining political control.

These official messages dictate the terms of acceptable public discourse and drive alternative ideas underground

They habituate citizens into acting “as if” they believe in the official doctrine, if for no other reason than that they do not publicly question it

The political scientist Lisa Weeden has written why authoritarian regimes coerce their citizens to engage in preposterous rituals. "the greater the absurdity of the required performance, the more clearly it demonstrates that the regime can make most people obey most of the time.”

an important connection between the representation and its creation.[45] To the extent that power in its crudest sense means the capacity to apply force, Marin argues, political cults and their attendant spectacles operate as a display of punitive force that is not exerted but nevertheless manifested through the representation of its potential. In the case of Syria, through the fantastic, magnified, multiplicative effects of Asad's image alongside those of obedient citizens, physical violence is deferred, made into coercive potential.[46] The more absurd the required performance, the more clearly it demonstrates that the regime can indeed make most people obey most of the time. And demonstrations of obedience create the depoliticizing conditions in which compliance becomes habitual and self-enforcing.

A politics of "as if," then, has important political consequences: It enforces obedience, induces complicity, identifies and ferrets out some disobedient citizens, such as M, and organizes the symbolic context within which struggles over the meaning of the nation, of selfhood, and of both political power and individual transgression take place. In the post-colonial context of Syria, the

If a regime can make the people around you partake in absurdities, you are less likely to challenge that regime. You will be more likely to obey it.

Of course, this doesn't mean regimes are not interested in indoctrination. They would prefer if people really did hold pro-regime attitudes and values

But the purpose of propaganda is not limited just to instilling desired beliefs.

Often, demonstrating the regime's strength, capacity, and resources to intimidate people is a more important goal.