Security at Stake: Media, Democracy, and Repression

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ABOUT PERRY WORLD HOUSE

Perry World House is a center for scholarly inquiry, teaching, research, international exchange, policy engagement, and public outreach on pressing global issues. Perry World House's mission is to bring the academic knowledge of the University of Pennsylvania to bear on the world's most pressing global policy challenges and to foster international policy engagement within and beyond the Penn community.

Located in the heart of campus at 38th Street and Locust Walk, Perry World House draws on the expertise of Penn's 12 schools and numerous globally oriented research centers to educate the Penn community and prepare students to be well-informed, contributing global citizens. At the same time, Perry World House connects Penn with leading policy experts from around the world to develop and advance innovative policy proposals.

Through its rich programming, Perry World House facilitates critical conversations about global policy challenges and fosters interdisciplinary research on these topics. It presents workshops and colloquia, welcomes distinguished visitors, and produces content for global audiences and policy leaders, so that the knowledge developed at Penn can make an immediate impact around the world.

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Introduction

<< In an era of unprecedented levels of technology-driven interconnectedness, information manipulation and propaganda remain favored tools of authoritarian forces. >>

In an era of unprecedented levels of technology-driven interconnectedness, information manipulation and propaganda remain favored tools of authoritarian forces. Globally, as media and technology platforms concentrate power and influence, efforts to combat information manipulation lag behind. At the same time, political and media repression—both at the domestic and international level—continue to grow as autocrats crack down on civil society and seek to co-opt media institutions.

Perry World House (PWH) convened a conference on "Media, Democracy, and Repression" in February 2025. The conference brought together policymakers, scholars, researchers, and journalists to examine developments in information manipulation, evaluate the role of local and public media institutions in democracies, and analyze what steps governments, civil society, and other actors can take to build resilience to foreign and domestic information manipulation and interference. Discussions centered on the evolving threats to democracy, emerging information manipulation tactics, and policy interventions to strengthen media integrity. This report synthesizes key insights and policy solutions proposed across the various discussions that constituted this conference.

Information Manipulation, Democracy, and Leadership

<< . . . democracy must adapt to new challenges, including information manipulation and propaganda. >>

Francisco Sagasti, the former president of Peru (2020-2021) and a Perry World House distinguished global leader, opened the conference by reflecting on emerging threats to democracy from information manipulation and propaganda. His remarks were informed by his own experience countering falsehoods and misinformation during the COVID19 pandemic. President Sagasti underscored the need to "reinvent democracy" in an era of digital disinformation. He emphasized that democracy must adapt to new challenges, including information manipulation and propaganda, highlighting the importance of:

• Strengthening democratic institutions to prevent their capture by special interests;

• Promoting political leadership based on transparency, adaptability, and evidence-driven decision-making;

• Treating truth as a public good through education and proactive communication; and

• Enhancing electoral integrity by countering misinformation through fact-based political discourse.

Sagasti also stressed the need for critical thinking and media literacy education to combat disinformation. In consideration of the role of governments in countering information manipulation without infringing on free speech, he argued that for those within government, accountability and transparency should be prioritized throughout the course of decision making.

Emerging Trends and Tactics in Information Manipulation and Media

<< In some places, including the United States, one participant argued, anti-democratic sentiment is rooted in feelings of insecurity. >>

On this topic, expert panelists discussed the changing ways international actors use information manipulation and propaganda to undermine democracy. They explored the effectiveness of these methods and analyzed the factors—like media policy, technology, political shifts—that allow these tactics to be successful.

Pressure on Democracy

Participants started by addressing an increasingly common argument from authoritarian leaders: democracy itself does not work and is particularly ill-suited to an information- and data-saturated world. This idea aligns with a central theme in recent Chinese propaganda, which asserts that "mass data" necessitates centralized control on the basis that it is the only way to properly shape society and guide it towards "right decisions."

In some places, including in the United States, one participant argued, anti-democratic sentiment is rooted in feelings of insecurity. This has provided ballast to those who argue that authoritarianism is the only way to reestablish a sense of safety. This

underlying sense of insecurity, in addition to societal cleavages, increases the effectiveness of manipulation. Polarization can be exploited to increase feelings of insecurity and the appeal of strongman rule.

As Media Platforms Evolve, Incentives for Information Manipulation Follow

One expert analyzed how technology has fundamentally reshaped the information environment by replacing traditional gatekeepers—journalists and editors—with algorithms that prioritize content based on engagement, virality, and profit. This shift has transformed information manipulation into a more participatory process, enabling anyone to create and spread content. Within this, the issue of uneven participation has arisen in which social media pretends to have an ethos of equity while in reality algorithms prioritize certain voices over others. Further, the data-driven nature of social media allows for precise tracking of user interactions, revealing who clicks on links, shares content, and engages with certain narratives which in turn enables increased effectiveness in algorithm-driven content provision. Generative AI has further

escalated concerns, as it makes disinformation more persuasive, enables large-scale, cost-effective campaigns, and allows for hyper-personalized messaging tailored to specific audiences. Information operations are also becoming more evasive, with increasing use of ephemeral content such as livestreams and disappearing reels, making fact-checking more difficult. Meanwhile, platform dynamics are shifting as users migrate to more enclosed and encrypted spaces, where content moderation is looser, and researchers struggle to access critical data, complicating efforts to combat the spread of false or manipulative information.

Erosion of Traditional Media and a Crisis of Information

Equally important are the challenges faced by traditional media, including concentrated media ownership, relentless commercial pressures, and deregulatory measures (like the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine in the United States in 1987[1]). Particularly in the United States, but to some extent globally as well, this has led to media consolidation, a reduction in the diversity of viewpoints, increased use of sensationalism to drive engagement and therefore profit, and the adoption of more partisan and ideologically-driven content. These factors have contributed to the rise of a media environment poorly inoculated against propaganda, and contributed to the emergence of a right-wing media ecosystem that operates outside traditional journalistic norms and is further amplified by social media platforms.

Particularly in the United States, according to panelists, technological change, the failure to break up media monopolies, changes in media

safeguards, and erosion of media ownership rules has significantly diminished local journalistic capacity and integrity. The collapse of local journalism has fueled the spread of misinformation and low-quality content with long-term consequences. Newspapers, once the backbone of original reporting, are disappearing, leaving behind "news deserts" where entire regions lack access to reliable local news. While people in these "deserts" continue to consume media, much of it consists of low-quality sources like "pink slime journalism," which is news that mimics traditional journalism in presentation but lacks credibility and promotes political, ideological, and commercial interests.[2] The loss of local news has serious societal effects, including higher levels of polarization and reduced civic engagement.[3, 4] Although panelists agree that there is no market-driven fix for this crisis, solutions exist beyond the failing commercial model. Rebuilding the media from the ground up through public and nonprofit models offers a viable path forward to restore trustworthy journalism and strengthen democratic discourse. Participants pointed to the efforts of the UK Media Reform Coalition[5] as an example of how the structure media can be reimagined to serve the public interest.

Anticipated decreases in U.S. funding in support of international public interest media—particularly USAID-supported outlets and funding to international organizations like the International Fund for Public Interest Media—will likely negatively affect short- and long-term media security and stability.

More broadly, the ongoing financial crisis in public-interest media amid the collapse of sustainable business models have further exacerbated the issue of inaccurate information going unchallenged in local press. In places where local journalism has

1   https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/topic-guide/fairness-doctrine

2   https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/pink-slime-journalism-and-a-history-of-media-manipulation-in-america.php

3   https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/abs/local-news-information-and-the-nationalization-of-us-elections/4AEEA64CB7EC2CF384434AB0482E63F4

4   https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/news-hole/86C7B8933122EB6EC229E4B05BBAA27C

5   https://www.mediareform.org.uk/

declined foreign actors like Russia and China have filled the informational void. Chinese subsidiaries, for instance, hold stakes in various media entities, shaping narratives to align with their interests, including in South Africa. Although Chinese influence in the South African media is not always overt, it serves as a clear example of how media ownership influences even domestic news ecosystems.[6]

South Africa: The Evolution of U.S. Policy

As an illustration, one panelist brought up the current U.S. administration's recent efforts to downgrade relations and curb aid to South Africa on the basis of alleged "egregious actions" against the Afrikaner population as an example of unchallenged rhetoric that is, most observers conclude, detached from reality.[7, 8] By tracing the evolution of this narrative, the expert showed how a previously marginal Afrikaner South African political group traveled to the United States and, through regular appearances in right wing podcasts and alongside other media influencers, eventually "graduated" to receiving airtime on Fox News to promote claims of white persecution in South Africa to a broader and more mainstream audience. Over time, this fortified narrative influenced policy decisions despite lacking factual basis.

Looking Forward

Participants encouraged the development of media owned by communities themselves, which pursues broader narratives external to the fast pace of information manipulation that often leaves journalism on the defensive. Rather than scrambling to counter the incessant production of misleading or false narratives, community centric independent journalism can have the resources to produce quality information without the pressure to counter every false claim that provokes outrage or draws attention. The Philadelphia Inquirer, which was bought by the Lenfest Institute, was provided as an example of a successful protection of local journalism from external economic pressures.[9]

Key questions raised in the course of this discussion:

- How do we create and sustain a media environment that fosters inclusive and diverse democratic discourse?

- How can democracies address the desire among populations for the security and stability that authoritarianism seemingly promises?

Proposed Policy Solutions:

- **Regulation of Tech Platforms:** Policies that adjust algorithmic incentives that prioritize engagement over accuracy and provide transparency as to what those algorithms are doing.

- **Public Interest Journalism Funding:** Enable shift from a profit-driven media model to a public or nonprofit-driven model.

- **Media Literacy Initiatives:** Institutionalize digital literacy education to foster critical thinking and engagement with information.

- **Counter-Narratives to Authoritarian Messaging:** Promote stories that reinforce democratic values and community resilience.

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6   https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-africa/beijings-global-media-influence/2022#footnote8_I9tPL1XDtg3n9z0wWBhNN r1yk4tb9-XffpQbV199Bwdk_bPZOSeDBDhEX

7   https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/addressing-egregious-actions-of-the-republic-of-south-africa/

8   https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/02/27/south-africa-white-genocide-claim/

9   https://www.lenfestinstitute.org/our-work/the-philadelphia-inquirer/

Foreign Influence Operations and Russian Election Interference

<< Russian influence efforts, particularly in countries such as Moldova or Georgia, often frame elections as a choice between resisting Russian authoritarianism or submitting to it. >>

This discussion centered on evaluating how successful Russian influence operations have been and what lessons might be taken from recent campaigns in Moldova, Georgia, and elsewhere, as well as how the media environment and public media trust affects the success of Russia's efforts.

Russian Goals and Tactics

One expert emphasized the importance of understanding Russia's overarching goals and how this particular aspect of hybrid war—information manipulation and election interference—contributes to its broader objectives. The panelist explained that the overall goal of Russia's election interference is to undermine U.S. power in Europe, weaken European alliances, and assert influence in Eastern Europe. Its methods include media and information warfare, financing political parties, and using war and threats to shape public opinion and create uncertainty. As a result, Russian influence efforts, particularly in countries such as Moldova or Georgia, often frame elections as a choice between

resisting Russian authoritarianism or submitting to it. Other types of election interference were evident in Romania in early 2025, where democratic processes were disrupted after a far-right, pro-Russia candidate surged in popularity through TikTok, leading state institutions to annul election results.[10]

Effectiveness

Turning to influence operations in developing countries, one panelist explained how Russia seeks to shape public perception over the long term in order to make its interests more politically acceptable, positioning itself as a viable ally, and making it easier for elites to align with Russian agendas. Before its invasion of Ukraine, for example, Russia significantly increased its foreign influence operations across the political, economic, and information spectrum in a number of countries, including striking bilateral economic deals with governments worldwide aimed to improve the perception of Moscow in these countries. These efforts are captured in the Resurgent Authoritarian Influence

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10   https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-romania-just-canceled-its-presidential-election/

(RAI) dataset, which reports on Russian and Chinese influence across international, regional, and domestic sources of online news.[11]

Currently, experts agreed, Russia appears to be "winning" in the information space—its ability to affect election outcomes and define political narratives in Eastern Europe and elsewhere remains formidable. Nevertheless, because of the strong democratic aspirations in many of the countries in the region and Russia's failure to achieve decisive military victory in Ukraine, the durability of its success remains uncertain. The situation is best characterized as an ongoing struggle between pro-democratic and pro-authoritarian forces. While in many ways Russia has been effective in undermining democratic institutions, the long-term impacts of its strategies remain unclear. Democratic resilience persists, including 2025 elections in Germany where the CDU/CSU party—which took a pro-democracy, anti-Russia stance—prevailed in elections.

Moldova's Case

Moldova's current government, led by Maia Sandu, sees the country's future in the EU, not with Russia, making the 2024 presidential election and 2025 parliamentary election key battlegrounds for Russian influence. Pro-Russian narratives have been pushed to shape public opinion, including false claims that the Moldovan government is threatening an eastern breakaway region (Transdniestria), fears of Moldova being militarized by the West, and misleading assertions that EU membership would impose LGBTQ "quotas" or allow foreigners to buy culturally significant property. Russian influence has come in many forms, with

Russian-owned media attacking politicians opposed to Russian influence, flooding the candidate field with pro-Russian contenders to divide the vote, and widespread vote-buying efforts supporting pro-Russian candidates.[12] The broader struggle between the West and Russia remains central to Moldovan elections, particularly in the context of Moldovan efforts to secure EU membership.[13] Russian media has historically dominated Moldova's information space, but the war in Ukraine prompted the Moldovan government to shut down Russian outlets operating in the country and led to a decline in trust in Russian-language media. Despite these efforts, however, Sandu prevailed in the presidential vote, albeit by a narrower margin than anticipated.

Looking Forward

Speakers emphasized the importance of providing citizens with clear and transparent information in real time about information manipulation operations activities. But that is difficult to do effectively.

In countries where populations are attuned to and resistant to Russian influence tactics, exposing Russian interference is easier and helps people make informed decisions despite exposure to it. Nevertheless, Russia excels at identifying and exacerbating social and economic divisions, and its work is easier when governments fail to acknowledge these issues or seek meaningful ways to address societal cleavages. Participants agreed that governments should focus on regulating social media platforms to curb the spread of disinformation while promoting media literacy, with Finland—which institutes robust media literacy programs starting at the elementary school level—

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11   https://web.sas.upenn.edu/mlp-devlab/rai/

12   https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldova-alleges-pro-russian-vote-buying-scheme-ahead-key-vote-2024-10-03/

13   https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1wnr5qdxe7o

serving as a strong example.[14, 15] Regarding media regulation, participants argued that the EU and U.S. were right to ban Russian state outlets RT and Sputnik, but further action could be warranted against Russian proxy outlets.[16, 17] In response to concerns about balancing free speech with banning propaganda outlets, one participant acknowledged the complexity of the issue and emphasized that bans must be coupled with transparency measures and public awareness campaigns.

Key questions raised in the course of this discussion:

- If Russian influence is often effective, particularly during elections, how can countries maintain free and fair elections?

- How can populations best be protected against Russian influence campaigns?

Proposed Policy Solutions:

- **Enhanced Election Security Measures:** Increase transparency in political financing and proactively and transparently share information and evidence of foreign influence operations.

- **Banning of Russian Propaganda Outlets:** Extend sanctions on Russian state-controlled media such as RT and Sputnik.

- **Strategic Communication Campaigns:** Inform the public about Russian disinformation tactics in real time.

- **Strengthening Local Media in Targeted Regions:** Invest in independent media aimed at underserved populations in Eastern Europe and developing nations to counter foreign influence.

14   https://www.oph.fi/en/education-and-qualifications/multiliteracy-and-media-literacy

15   https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/10/world/europe/finland-misinformation-classes.html

16   https://www.wired.com/story/russia-backed-media-outlets-are-under-fire-in-the-us-but-still-trusted-worldwide/

17   https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-60791734

Repression and Media

This discussion explored the ways both old and new in which autocrats repress media and the information space in their own countries. Specific attention was given to examples of these phenomena in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Nicaragua and broader lessons that can be drawn from these examples.

Media Capture

Speakers identified media capture as one of the major modalities through which autocratic regimes control the information space. Media capture occurs when news media "advance the commercial or political concerns of state and/or non-state special interest groups" which maintain some means of influence (political, financial, interrelational, etc.) over the media.[18]

Independent journalism news media that is produced free from external influence is threatened by the interference of governments or other external sources such as corporations or influential individuals.[19] As a major enabler of autocratic repression of independent journalism, the rise of media capture follows a clear pattern in which state bodies and private businesses collaborate to control the media landscape. This process often begins with regulatory capture, as governments manipulate licensing procedures to favor loyal outlets. Asserting direct control over public media is another common step, which allows the state to shape narratives directly.[20] Financially, governments may shift public funding to media outlets aligned with their interests through the purchase of advertising, ensuring the media outlet's financial dependence. Financial corruption plays a key role, with public money used to build and consolidate media empires that serve political agendas, ensuring those in power can maintain control.

Efforts to rebuild independent public media face major obstacles, as the very institutions responsible for media capture—banks, political families, intelligence agencies, and other state-linked entities—are also the ones controlling the policy tools needed for reform.

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18   https://www.cima.ned.org/themes/media-capture/

19   https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/independent-journalism/43789

20   https://journals.ptks.pl/cejc/article/view/586

Indonesia

Indonesia's media landscape is heavily influenced by oligarchic power structures, where powerful elites with political ties dominate the industry, creating overlapping interests between media and the state. News coverage itself is often a bargaining tool. Media companies are largely dependent on advertising revenue which is often driven by government sponsored ad placements, further entrenching the state's ability to influence, and, at times, dictate content. Additionally, restrictive laws and regulations limit freedom of expression, with online defamation and content moderation laws frequently weaponized against journalists and digital platforms.[21] These trends continue under Indonesia's current president. At a time of political tension in February 2025 over economic policies, the president signaled his strength by posting photos on X of himself at a lavish dinner with the country's preeminent media editors-in-chief, raising concerns about state influence over the press.[22, 23]

The Philippines

Journalism in the Philippines faces significant challenges, operating within a culture of impunity where a weak judicial system allows journalists to be targeted with libel claims. One participant argued that the rise of influencers and celebrity bloggers who can disseminate information to wide audiences but are not held accountable for the accuracy of their statements, combined with widespread disinformation—particularly from China—poses an existential threat to trust in news.

Chinese-backed narratives aim to divide the Philippines by portraying the current president's stance against China on South China Sea disputes as a destabilizing force. Other Chinese influence efforts include narratives discrediting the country's long-standing alliance with the United States by framing the Philippines as a pawn of the United States and instilling fear that resisting Chinese influence will inevitably lead to war. These narratives, often pushed by Filipino proxies and influencers, further complicate the media's role in maintaining an informed and independent public discourse by sowing uncertainty and eroding trust in traditional independent journalism.

Nicaragua

In Nicaragua, the Ortega-Murillo regime has completely dismantled independent journalism, forcing all credible media into exile and making news accessible only through the diaspora. The government, relying on external support from Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, has adopted repressive tactics modeled after these regimes, particularly aligning its media environment with Russian outlets.[24, 25] Nicaragua has further entrenched its dictatorship by legalizing previously unlawful government actions through a new constitution. The behavior of this regime demonstrates how authoritarian leaders rise and consolidate power by establishing influence through both domestic and international channels.

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21   https://freedomhouse.org/country/indonesia/freedom-net/2023

22   https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2025/02/22/darkindonesia-protests-against-prabowos-cutbacks-enter-fifth-day.html

23   https://x.com/prabowo/status/1893329929158434934

24   https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/09/nicaragua-ortega-crackdown-surveillance-authoritarianism-russia-opposition-dissent/

25   https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/nicaragua-strengthens-alliance-with-russian-media/

Looking Forward

In many countries, government regulation and legal frameworks play a key role in media repression. Participants cautioned against excessive reliance on regulation to combat foreign influence, citing a positive correlation between anti-disinformation laws and increased government control over the media,[26] paradoxically hurting media freedom in the name of fighting disinformation. Among these challenges, there is also decreased public demand for credible print journalism relative to obtaining news through social media and limited willingness to pay for news. It is difficult for outlets to compete with the dominance of social media, and long-form reporting increasingly needs to incorporate videos and visuals to stay relevant. Although digital platforms provide new opportunities for local journalists, safety remains a critical concern for those operating under repressive regimes. Additionally, the danger and undervaluation of journalism as a profession deter many from entering the field. One participant suggested that international organizations can support press freedom by exerting stronger pressure on both member and non-member states to protect domestic journalistic freedom and offering financial backing for independent media.

Key questions raised in the discussion:

- How can independent journalism be protected against autocratic repression conducted by domestic governments?

- As domestic media landscapes change, how can domestic populations still receive reliable and trustworthy news?

Proposed Policy Solutions:

- **Anti-Censorship Protections:** Advocate for stronger international mechanisms to counter state-driven media repression such as support for watchdog organizations,[27] targeted sanctions,[28] or international-initiatives to defend media.[29]

- **Support for Exiled Journalists:** Provide financial and logistical support for displaced media organizations.

- **Legal Protections Against Defamation Laws:** Push for judicial reforms to prevent misuse of defamation laws against journalists.

- **Dismantling Media Capture:** Restrict government control over private media ownership and state-funded propaganda.

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26   https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/chilling-legislation/

27   https://rsf.org/en/who-are-we

28   https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/04/eu-global-human-rights-sanctions-regime-restrictive-measures-prolonged/

29   https://www.unesco.org/en/global-media-defence-fund

Solutions: Government Policy and Public Media

<< The forces that allow information manipulation to work—such as political polarization and public distrust in traditional media and government institutions—are the same ones that hinder policy solutions, necessitating a comprehensive, structural approach to rethinking media regulation. >>

This discussion investigated the effectiveness of policy interventions such as government efforts to deter information manipulation, investments in societal resilience, and media development. It also examined which policy interventions are most needed and how they might be implemented.

Stronger Regulatory Frameworks

A major point of discussion surrounded the EU's landmark Digital Services Act (DSA) and whether a) it is working and b) could be a relevant model for other countries and regions. As a starting point panelists criticized calls to push the EU to dismantle the DSA in support of the regulatory preferences of U.S.-based social media platforms.

Stronger domestic regulatory frameworks concerning media are essential to address the structural problems caused by disinformation, which cannot be attributed solely to a few bad actors. To solve this issue, it is necessary to define the problem clearly and adopt a range of policy interventions, including structural interventions like breaking up concentrations of power among the largest media

businesses. One expert also suggested that public service media, while important, cannot solve the problem on its own, as it lacks the ability to insulate itself from government and deliver long-term solutions to issues impacting entire media landscapes. The forces that allow information manipulation to work—such as political polarization and public distrust in traditional media and government institutions—are the same ones that hinder policy solutions, necessitating a comprehensive, structural approach to rethinking media regulation.

Structural Media Reform

Panelists argued in favor of structural media reform that includes financial and institutional support for aggressive investigative journalism, particularly in the face of foreign influence campaigns, and a re-evaluation of the failed market for legacy media. To address financial shortcomings, some called for greater equity investment in digital media from the private sector, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, alongside increased transparency from social media platforms regarding

their algorithms and content recommendations. Others rejected the idea of private funding and argued only public support, conceived through a democratic lens that takes into account under-represented constituencies, could create the type of democratic media environment societies need today. In terms of platform regulation, some speakers thought the major platforms should give users control over the data they collect and allow for independent investigations if they fail to comply.

A key challenge to structural media reform is the adversarial relationship between regulating governments and platforms. Collaboration is essential, especially on issues like election interference. Regulations like the DSA, which mandate the removal of "illegal" content such as terrorism and anti-Semitism, can be part of the solution, but, some argued, alternative funding schemes for platforms are needed to free them from the engagement-seeking practice of highlighting provocative content. Examples include subscription-based media models which can be further supplemented financially through government support, as seen in Canada's digital news subscription tax credit.[30] Additionally, some panelists argued that supporting local media ownership through tax incentives for local journalists, as New York State has done, and ensuring platforms like Meta compensate news publishers for posted links (as Canada has mandated), can help enforce the value of participating in journalism.[31,32] International organizations, like the International Fund for Public Interest Media, play a key role in supporting these initiatives and should continue to be capitalized.

Will and Enforcement

Participants agreed that policy alone is not enough to combat disinformation and media manipulation—it requires both political will and policy enforcement. A lack of international consistency in platform regulation and high degrees of variance in support for independent journalism further hamper efforts to establish effective checks and balances in the media ecosystem. With inconsistent regulation across markets, platforms face low pressure to regulate themselves, and highly unequal protections for journalists and media organizations across countries contributes to weakening global norms for journalistic independence and produces a media ecosystem that varies significantly in safety and strength around the world.

A key aspect of resilience is recognizing that information security is tied to physical and national security. Countries should consider lifelong media and digital literacy programs integrated into school curricula and adult education.

However, a major challenge remains: lies and conspiracies are often more compelling than complex, uncomfortable truths. Gender differences also shape media consumption, contributing to fragmented and isolated media worlds. Ultimately, solutions to media and tech challenges will not be found solely within those industries—society must decide how much it is willing to invest in sustaining a healthy media ecosystem.

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30   https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/tax/individuals/topics/about-your-tax-return/tax-return/completing-a-tax-return/deductions-credits-expenses/deductions-credits-expenses/digital-news-subscription.html

31   https://www.politico.com/news/2024/04/21/new-york-journalism-tax-breaks-00153482

32   https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/online-news.html

Key questions raised in the discussion:

- What regulatory frameworks can best foster collaboration between governments and social media platforms?

- What policies can foster—or incentivize—the reestablishment of high-quality local media?

Proposed Policy Solutions:

- **Regulation of Social Media Platforms:** The EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) provides a model for requiring algorithm transparency and accountability, although enforcement mechanisms must be adapted for different political contexts.

- **Investment in Public Media:** Increased funding for nonprofit media initiatives, modeled after the BBC and other public broadcasting systems – these institutions should be protected from political interference to ensure credibility.

- **Media Resilience Programs:** Implement media literacy curricula at all levels of education to inoculate citizens against information manipulation.

- **Holding Tech Companies Accountable:** Enforce taxation and revenue-sharing models for tech platforms to support journalism.

Public Keynote Address by Ruth Ben-Ghiat

<< Ben-Ghiat explained how authoritarian regimes often form bargains with elites to legitimize corruption, suppress dissent, and hollow out institutions, using media to spread half-truths and manipulate public perception. >>

Ben-Ghiat's talk focused on the dynamics of authoritarianism. Ben-Ghiat explained how authoritarian regimes often form bargains with elites to legitimize corruption, suppress dissent, and hollow out institutions, using media to spread half-truths and manipulate public perception. These regimes rewrite history to legitimize past repression, erase past resistance, and target current dissenters. The talk also addressed the emotional and moral tactics strongmen use to manipulate the public, as well

as the role of media in exposing the consequences of authoritarianism. Social media, while a tool for both autocrats and activists, can empower collective mobilization and non-violent protest. The discussion ended with a call for democratic movements to craft compelling and localized narratives that resonate with people's grievances to push back against the chaos and propaganda of authoritarian regimes.

Conclusion

<< Perry World House aims to work with partners to disseminate these insights to policymakers, media organizations, and academic institutions to drive concrete action toward safeguarding democracy in the digital age. >>

The February 25-26, 2025, Perry World House conference on Media, Democracy, and Repression explored the ways in which the media today is struggling to support democracy and combat repression, why this is the case, and the different actors, institutions, and policies that can contribute to a solution. The conference highlighted the urgent need for structural solutions to counteract vulnerabilities in the media ecosystem.

Key Takeaways:

- The necessity of strengthening international cooperation on media integrity;

- The importance of supporting independent journalism through policy and financial mechanisms;

- The role of media literacy in equipping citizens to resist disinformation;

- The need for multi-sectoral collaboration between governments, tech companies, and academia.

The February 2025 convening was Perry World House's inaugural democracy conference. Perry World House aims to work with partners to disseminate these insights to policymakers, media organizations, and academic institutions to drive concrete action toward safeguarding democracy in the digital age. PWH's democracy program will build on the foundational work developed in this conference and continue to expand its research and reach, taking on new issues—like gender, authoritarianism, and democratic renewal—in the years ahead.

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