

The Dual Edges of Information Environments in Strategic Competition

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In the modern information age, the distinction between open and restricted environments significantly impacts strategic competition and operational dynamics, particularly in Operations in Information Environment (OIE). Unquestionably, democratic societies, characterized by their open information landscapes, enjoy many benefits but face the unique challenge of disinformation due to the unrestricted information environment. On the other hand, authoritarian regimes circumvent and stifle innovation with their restrictive information paradigms but at the expense of strategic agility and public trust.

Democratic Societies: Freedom with Vulnerabilities

One of the critical advantages of democratic societies lies in their ability to flourish based on the fundamental principle of freedom, which encompasses the freedom of information. Kosack and Fung believe that future research on transparency and accountability will aim to determine the many arrangements and circumstances in which clarity enhances governance outcomes.¹ The unimpeded availability of information improves transparency, enables well-informed public discussions, and promotes the development of new ideas and practices.

Enterprises operating within such contexts can leverage worldwide expertise, facilitating technical innovation progress and fostering international partnerships. McCarthy and Fluck emphasize that implementing transparency in information and disclosure can also boost global assurance.² Thus, the freedom of speech and expression will enhance the standing of democratic nations in strategic alliances and partnerships.

The United States (US) is a model country that exercises this information transparency. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution is the foundation of the robust protections for freedom of speech and expression against federal, state, and local government censorship.³ Since these protections extend to the Internet, there is minimal government-mandated technical filtering in the United States.

¹ Stephen Kosack and Archon Fung, “Does Transparency Improve Governance?,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 17, no. 1 (May 11, 2014): 65–87, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-032210-144356>.

² Daniel R. McCarthy and Matthew Fluck, “The Concept of Transparency in International Relations: Towards a Critical Approach,” *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 2 (June 1, 2017): 424–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066116651688>.

³ “First Amendment and Censorship,” Text, Advocacy, Legislation & Issues, June 13, 2008, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/censorship>.

However, the absence of restrictions on information dissemination renders the democratic system vulnerable to disinformation tactics. A US joint publication in information operations mentions that the rapid dissemination of information facilitated by technology and social media platforms has significantly magnified disinformation's influence and velocity, leading to immediate and enduring consequences.⁴ We evidence the current effort of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to influence foreign politics by implementing "three warfare concepts."⁵ Within strategic rivalry, the PRC can exploit the state of openness by propagating false narratives to manipulate public opinion or undermine trust in democratic processes and institutions.

Because of the unrestricted flow of information, the United States is highly vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda spread by adversaries. The United States had the most TikTok users in the world in 2022, with 134.46 million people using the social media app in the country.⁶ With the development of powerful AI and deepfake technologies, TikTok can potentially propagate fake news, generate prejudice, or spread disinformation using this social media site. The exponential growth of technology generates a more complex situation to determine the factual information flows in the social media platform.

Authoritarian Regimes: Control at a Cost

With their top-down control of information, authoritarian societies are less susceptible to external disinformation campaigns. They can present and maintain a unified national narrative free

⁴ *JP 3-04 Information in Joint Operations*, 4th ed., 2022, I3-4.

⁵ Peter Matis, "China's 'Three Warfares' in Perspective," War on the Rocks, January 30, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/01/chinas-three-warfares-perspective/>.

⁶ "TikTok User Age, Gender, & Demographics (2023)," Exploding Topics, October 12, 2022, <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/tiktok-demographics>.

of the 'noise' that frequently characterizes open information environments.⁷ We witness this effort in how Russia has imposed the latest federal laws that allow the criminalizing of anyone reporting and protesting the war in Ukraine.⁸ This consistency in control of information provides for expeditious decision-making and policy implementations without public dissent or prolonged debates.

However, this controlled environment is not without its disadvantages. By suppressing dissent and alternative perspectives, these societies may stifle innovation and impede the natural evolution of ideas, which is essential for strategic adaptability. Moreover, the very control that protects against external disinformation can cultivate the seeds of internal mistrust, as citizens become suspicious of state narratives and suspect manipulation or suppression of the truth.

Implications for OIE

Being at the intersection of technology, information, and operations, the essence of the information environment significantly impacts the OIE paradigm. In democratic settings, OIEs can leverage diverse information sources, foster collaboration, and propel technological advancement. However, they must also make substantial investments in counter-disinformation strategies to ensure the integrity of their operations and preserve public trust.

On the other hand, authoritarian-driven OIEs may be more predictable and less susceptible to external information threats. However, they risk becoming insular and less adaptable, and they

⁷ “Issue Brief: How Disinformation Impacts Politics and Publics,” National Endowment for Democracy, May 29, 2018, <https://www.ned.org/issue-brief-how-disinformation-impacts-politics-and-publics/>.

⁸ Alexei Maishev, “Russia Criminalizes Independent War Reporting, Anti-War Protests | Human Rights Watch,” March 7, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/07/russia-criminalizes-independent-war-reporting-anti-war-protests>.

may face internal credibility issues if the populace begins to question or doubt state-driven narratives.

In conclusion, the contrast between information freedom and restriction significantly impacts strategic competition and OIE dynamics. While democratic societies enjoy their open environments, they must remain vigilant against the destabilizing effects of disinformation. Despite being shielded from specific external information threats, authoritarian regimes must account for the potential stagnation and trust deficits their controlled environments may foster. Understanding and navigating these nuances will become crucial for effective strategy and operations in the information landscape as the digital era evolves.

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