



# MEASURING THE IMPACT OF MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION, AND PROPAGANDA IN LATIN AMERICA

*Identifying Sources, Patterns, and Networks  
Propagating Foreign Disinformation Campaigns*

## Executive Summary



Edited, organized, and synthesized by **Global Americans**

A project in partnership with:



## Our Project Partners

### **Global Americans**

Global Americans is a Washington, D.C.-based think tank that specializes in providing smart news and research about Latin America and the Caribbean, written and packaged for policy impact and popular debate. Through an extensive network of scholars, journalists, and activists, Global Americans produces analysis on democracy, human rights, climate change, social inclusion, and foreign policy. Global Americans leads diverse research projects designed to provide policymakers with the tools needed to promote positive change and to build more prosperous democracies in the Americas. Past research projects have included a Working Group on Inter-American Relations, a series on the future of U.S.-Colombia relations, a series on the future of U.S.-Ecuador relations, and a project on good governance in the Caribbean, among many others. In addition to publishing articles and reports, Global Americans is committed to convening experts and policymakers through public conferences, roundtable discussions, seminars, and events in the United States and across the hemisphere.

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### **Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM)**

ITESM is a Monterrey, Mexico-based university with satellite campuses throughout Mexico and Central America. Often referred to as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) of Mexico, the university specializes in engineering, science, computer science, and increasingly, policymaking and political science, with a specific orientation toward quantitative methods and analysis. ITESM is unique in its academic and policy profile in Mexico. One of its cross-disciplinary projects is its Entrepreneurship and Transformation Lab—which has supported high social impact initiatives in more than 42 countries. The lab has developed an algorithm and tracking tool to monitor social media by detecting, tracing, and analyzing messages that are likely coordinated by non-personal sources (bots) and are designed to spread misinformation and discord.

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### **Centro para la Apertura y Desarrollo en América Latina (CADAL)**

CADAL is a Buenos Aires-based think tank that has conducted a number of studies on Russian-state media. CADAL is one of the preeminent organizations working on the issue of “sharp power,” and they have done extensive work on this topic across the Southern Cone (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay). Under a multi-year National Endowment for Democracy project, CADAL has also led a regional network of NGOs and universities in conducting research on democracy and human rights.

*Members of CADAL involved in the project:*

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### **Medianálisis**

A Venezuela-based nonprofit, Medianálisis was created by leading independent journalists and communications professors. One of its founders, Andrés Cañizález, helped create the Instituto de Prensa y Sociedad (IPYS) in Venezuela, the first Venezuela-based network of journalists dedicated to defending freedom of expression and the lives of journalists. The non-profit is dedicated specifically to detecting, tracing, and reporting on misinformation and disinformation from foreign and domestic sources in Venezuela. It is the only organization of its kind operating in the very difficult environment in Venezuela today.

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### **Universidad del Rosario**

A Bogotá-based university, the Universidad del Rosario is one of the leading universities in Colombia with programs in political science, international relations, and communications. The university boasts an extensive network of journalists and academics, and it has led investigations on corruption and illicit markets. Universidad del Rosario has particular influence in Colombia and is home to an interdisciplinary team that has worked on many of the issues central to this project.

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Global Americans would like to thank the U.S. Department of State for its support of this research.

# Executive Summary: Measuring the Impact of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Propaganda in Latin America

Today, new forms of political influence, often wielded through state-sponsored media disinformation campaigns, are a part of a strategy by non-democratic regimes. For external actors, these media sources and their activities reflect a long-term strategy to broaden geo-strategic and even territorial goals by building allies, undermining United States and Western influence, and recasting the international order in favor of non-democratic states. Though Latin America and the Caribbean are often overlooked in discussions on the phenomenon, in the past decade, foreign state media have assumed a greater role in the Western Hemisphere's media landscape, both directly and indirectly. Indeed, state media companies from non-democratic states are investing heavily to increase their global presence, including in local language media sites, YouTube channels, news bureaus, and on social media. In many cases, a central goal of these efforts is to influence public perception of these non-democratic states and their policies, and to tilt local media coverage and sow disinformation and discord. Countering this near-and long-term threat to democratic norms, public consensus and discourse, and values of transparency, civility, tolerance, open markets and political systems, and human rights requires first understanding the sources, methods, targets, and themes of these state-based propaganda and disinformation campaigns.

Driven by fundamental research questions that remain largely unaddressed in the current literature—how is misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda disseminated in Latin America by foreign state media sources and consumed by Latin American audiences, and what are the regional policy implications of such consumption?—we have sought to gain a comparative, region-wide perspective on disinformation and its impact on Latin America and the Caribbean. To this end, Global Americans formed a cross-regional network to thoroughly detect, monitor, and evaluate foreign state media and the way in which these actors and their agents produce and spread misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda.

Working with four local counterpart organizations—Centro para la Apertura y Desarrollo de América Latina (CADAL), Medianálisis, Universidad del Rosario and Escuela de Gobierno y Transformación Pública Tecnológico de Monterrey—this project team has spent nearly 16 months identifying and reporting on the social media agents engaged in disinformation, and monitoring their efforts to influence civil society, the media, and policymakers in Latin America in order to develop an understanding of these external actors' tactics and intentions. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as one thematic vehicle through which one might understand the network of actors at play and the way in which these actors deploy their preferred tactics, Global Americans and our project partners have carefully monitored, categorized, and analyzed traditional (e.g., newspapers, television, and radio outlets) and non-traditional (e.g., social media) media sources throughout the hemisphere.

While the disinformation landscape varies throughout the hemisphere, there are similarities that transcend national borders, the primary of which is a sustained effort by non-democratic governments—like China and Russia, and to a lesser extent, Cuba, Venezuela, and Iran—to seize control of major domestic and regional sociopolitical and economic trends and bend them in favor of their own geopolitical agenda. Each of our project partners has conducted rigorous quantitative and qualitative research, covering Argentina, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, our teams have analyzed disinformation and misinformation trends as they relate to the dissemination of intentional or unintentional erroneous information, propaganda praising the actions of governments in their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and criticism levied against those governments' shortcomings.

Our research also includes an examination of the use of “sharp power” in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Peru. The term “sharp power” is broadly defined as a new phenomenon that is often used by non-democratic regimes seeking to attract, distract, and manipulate audiences in democratic countries through their communications outlets, cultural centers, and global learning institutes. Sharp power effectively creates a positive image of the regime via targeted messaging at the international level and influence exertion at the national level. It can result in political divisions and manipulate audiences by stirring up controversy within society or with other countries. This sort of interference is also referred to as information operations, which consist of disinformation campaigns, often orchestrated by media affiliated with these countries. Moreover, many state-owned media companies from China, Russia, and other countries lack transparency, an aspect of their communications strategy meant to help camouflage the full range of their activities.

Over the course of this study, our teams have evaluated misleading and propagandistic media stories in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, which has allowed Global Americans and our partners to identify the modalities and source of international and domestic disinformation campaigns throughout Latin America. We have covered the extent, nature, and objectives of foreign state-media disinformation campaigns, the targets of those efforts across population sub-groups and across select topics of choice. We have thoroughly studied the social media landscape to determine the affiliated but undeclared partners of foreign state media, uncovering patterns and networks across the hemisphere to understand how coverage is being picked up and spread wittingly and unwittingly.

Our cross-regional research project revealed the following high-level findings:

- China, Russia, and other undemocratic actors are active in promoting disinformation and propaganda in Latin America through their state-sponsored media channels, though the degree and scope of these efforts vary from country-to-country. The most active of these are Russia Today (RT), Telesur, Sputnik Mundo, and Xinhua Español; Twitter and Facebook are actively used in the social media sphere.
- Chinese and Russian misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda are disproportionately concentrated on thematic targets that lie at the intersection of democratic fault lines, inflaming local political rifts, promoting like-minded and often non-democratic local forces, and portraying China and Russia as benevolent partners and alternatives to the United States throughout the region.

- While Chinese and Russian government disinformation operations are often similar, there are key differences. Russia lacks the means to properly court deeper commercial opportunities and its disinformation strategy is focused on disrupting social order and political stability at a national level, as seen in Colombia and Chile, two known U.S. allies. Russia also seeks to gain new friends that are preferably disinclined to the U.S. in the hope of expanding their political influence. In contrast, China is the world's second largest economy, a major trading partner throughout the region, and an important foreign investor. While the Russian government generally attempts to disrupt, the Chinese government's disinformation strategy tries to position China as the new benevolent hegemon and the dominant international power in the current international system.

- While Mexico lies at one end of the disinformation paradigm, with propaganda from foreign state media considerably less intense and much more engaged in the cultural activism space, Venezuela lies at the other the end of the disinformation extreme, home to overt and direct disinformation from China, Russia, and the Venezuelan authorities themselves, all undermining democratic forces in the country.

- In Mexico, the TEC team found that the main disseminators of authentic news were traditional media outlets, while disinformation and misinformation came from local media or users with a high degree of negativity and polarization, as measured by the project's novel sentiment analysis tool. The TEC team also found that the federal government's handling of the pandemic proved to be a particularly volatile and polarizing battleground of narratives, making up about 10 percent of all Twitter posts studied (a total of 217,462 Twitter posts), of which 3.5 percent were in favor of the government's handling of the pandemic while 6.5 percent opposed it.

- Research on Peru revealed that Chinese state media is the most active in the Andean country, likely due to Peru's wealth of mineral resources and oil, and the existence of a relatively sizable community of Chinese descent. Chinese influence is most felt through the local media, academic circles, and government officials, many of whom have visited China. Research points to Chinese government messaging centered on painting a positive picture of China's achievements in reducing poverty and effectively fighting COVID-19, while helping Peru with medical care and supplies. In contrast, among foreign state media efforts in Peru, Russian engagement is far less a factor, particularly compared to Russian engagement in other Latin American countries, such as Colombia, Venezuela, and Argentina.

- Research indicates considerable Russian and Chinese engagement in Argentina in the media and information space. For China, Argentina is a significant source of key commodities, including soybeans, meat, and seafood, while for Russia, the Argentine government's lukewarm relationship with the U.S. is of keen interest, as it allows Moscow to cast its influence outside of its traditional spheres of influence in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Research found that Chinese efforts largely centered around promoting the Chinese economic model and narratives of solidarity, while Russian propaganda was particularly active in positively portraying its vaccine, Sputnik V, with its disinformation operations seeking to tarnish American and European vaccines.

- Research on Colombia revealed the presence of foreign state media but to varying degrees. The study looked at 86,615 Twitter posts published in Spanish by nine news agencies between September 1, 2019, through September 30, 2020; a total of 1,464 profiles were manually reviewed to report on the disinformation process, including the creation, production, and dissemination of messages, and found that 184 accounts spread posts created by Chinese media outlets, including alleged cyborgs (18) mainly located in Venezuela, Argentina, Colombia, and Uruguay and highly suspicious users (3) located in Venezuela (2) and Mexico (1); 247 accounts propagated information created by Russian media outlets, including alleged cyborgs (40) and highly suspicious users (10) mainly located in Colombia; and 225 accounts propagated information created by Cuban and Venezuelan media outlets, including cyborgs (18) located in Venezuela, Colombia, and Cuba, as well as highly suspicious users (10) located in Colombia.

- Chinese messaging in Colombia centers on its role as an important trade partner and therefore the narrative projected is one of mutually beneficial partnership between the two countries. In contrast, Russian state media in Colombia has engaged most actively during moments of social discontent, with that messaging largely centered around anti-government talking points.

- Colombia's role as a U.S. ally has made its way into Russian messaging. Our research indicates that Venezuelan political actors have also engaged in aggressive misinformation efforts against the Colombian government, due in part to Bogotá's willingness to host large numbers of Venezuelan refugees and members of the Venezuelan opposition.

Our findings underscore the importance of better understanding foreign state-media, their activities, their counterparts, their preferred themes, and their preferred tactics in Latin America and the Caribbean. Moreover, these findings reaffirm the critical significance of better informed and prepared journalists, civil society actors, academics, and policymakers, so that these actors can better detect and counteract non-democratic foreign state media campaigns. Investing in promoting a more politically conscious citizenry in the hemisphere that is more understanding—and even skeptical—of non-democratic state media and their activities and tactics is of utmost importance. Public debate is vital and needs to be well-informed and fact checked. The price for non-engagement and apathy toward disinformation networks is too high and not confronting this challenge risks perpetuating ongoing anti-democratic trends and further eroding democratic institutions in the Western Hemisphere.

As part of this project, Global Americans successfully organized a seminar with leading reporters, academics, thought leaders, civil society members, and influencers across Latin America to engage the region as we seek to mitigate the pernicious effects of disinformation and propaganda. Central to these efforts is effective knowledge-sharing, fact-checking, education, and monitoring of both traditional and social media platforms. The waves created by these partnerships, seminars, and summits are promising and set forth a clear path for effective collaboration in defense of democratic values in the Americas.



Ultimately, this study—through a primary but not exclusive focus on disinformation and misinformation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic—has gleaned significant insights as to the geopolitical motivations and strategies deployed by non-democratic regimes—whether headed by Vladimir Putin, Nicolás Maduro, or Xi Jinping—in a region that in recent decades has emerged as an ideological battleground between Western-style, free-market liberal democracy and statist autocracy. Understanding how misinformation and disinformation spreads and the context under which malign actors operate to sow discord and misinform our communities is critical to developing a plan of action to mitigate its deadly consequences. Similarly, understanding how malign foreign powers seek to take advantage of local vulnerability—political, economic, diplomatic, or epidemiological—in the furtherance of their own geopolitical objectives, can help nations save lives and strengthen their public policy responses when facing major crises that are made worse by disinformation. On behalf of Global Americans and our project partners, we hope that our project will serve as an early lodestar for understanding how to identify, mitigate, and counteract disinformation throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and the entirety of the Western Hemisphere.