



Five Authoritarian Pandemic Messaging Frames and How to Respond

Nad'a Kovalčíková and Ariane Tabatabai

Summary

As the coronavirus pandemic has spread around the world, authoritarian actors have engaged in robust information-manipulation campaigns. China—where the virus originated and spread due to the government’s initial cover up and mismanagement—became the champion of these efforts. Iran and, to a lesser extent, Russia, followed its lead, seeking to shift the global conversation from China’s and their own failures to confront the disease head on. They have also tried to place the blame to the United States and Europe, portraying these democracies’ responses as inadequate and highlighting their shortcomings. Their efforts have contributed to a coronavirus infodemic, which the World Health Organization has defined as “an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.” This infodemic has fueled the ongoing public-health crisis by further undermining trust in democratic institutions, the independent press, and facts and data.

The coronavirus infodemic is likely to continue to evolve, given that the fight against the pandemic is far from over, but its contours have already been drawn, making it possible to assess the information-manipulation efforts undertaken by malign actors during the last months. Understanding how and why they have engaged in information manipulation leads to an initial set of recommendations on how to contain the infodemic as well as how to prevent similar efforts that could stymie responses to future public-health pandemics. We identify five messaging frames used by China, Russia, and Iran in the first six months of the pandemic with implications for public health, democracy and governance, and transatlantic relations and offer recommendations to address them.

Every crisis goes through several stages, and it is necessary to detect and monitor evolving tactics and frames used by malign actors in the globalizing information space early on. By doing so, democracies can ensure a more effective mitigation, robust preparedness, rapid response, and as painless a recovery as possible when facing public-health emergencies or potential economic, security, or environmental crises.

Introduction

A coronavirus infodemic has accompanied the pandemic from the outset. The virus, which originated in China in 2019, was spreading globally by early 2020. It propagated faster than accurate and timely informa-

tion about its origin, cure, ways of transmission, prevention methods, and protective measures. Around the world, the initial response to the pandemic—including communication around it—could and should have been more efficient and forceful. And virtually all countries affected by the virus should have been able to mitigate the negative effects of the simultaneous infodemic in a timely and effective manner. But as the disease spread, the infodemic propagated with it, and while some governments scrambled to counter falsehoods and conspiracy theories, others were actively involved in spreading more of these.

The initial response of the Chinese authorities to the news of the outbreak of the pandemic was to focus on the political consequences and optics of the emerging crisis, rather than on public health. When public-health experts and medical doctors tried to ring the alarm bells about several individuals contracting the virus in Wuhan, they were summoned for spreading “rumors” and detained. The state-run Xinhua News Agency published a Wuhan police warning to China’s health workers and other potential whistleblowers: “The police call on all netizens to not fabricate rumors, not spread rumors, not believe rumors.” As a Washington Post report put it, the “authorities cracked down [as] the outbreak was quickly worsening amid an information vacuum.”

As China’s government understood well, an information void creates an opportunity to intervene in discourse through manipulated narratives that can shape public opinion in one’s favor or to suppress information. Using manipulated information and framing tactics allowed it to promote information that was to its advantage and to leave out less convenient, potentially harmful, or critical facts. As the pandemic claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and inflicted economic damage across the world, the Chinese information-manipulation efforts propagated with it. Beijing deployed the full force of the state’s media apparatus and social-media presence to lead a global authoritarian effort aimed at changing and framing the conversation around the coronavirus, contributing to information chaos and undermining democracy.

Like China, Iran politicized its public-health crisis, covered up the scale of the problem, and dragged its feet in formulating and implementing a response to the spread of the disease. As two medical professionals who had previously worked in the Iran wrote, the failure to react efficiently to the spread of coronavirus was not due to the lack of an adequate healthcare system, the country having one of the best in its region. Instead, the lack of sufficient preparation due to the denial of the scale and likely impact of the disease, the politicization of the issue, and the decision to put optics over medical needs led to the regime’s botched response. The responses by China and Iran to the coronavirus were an early warning to other nations that politicizing the public-health crisis would stymie the response to it.

Later, Russia also became an epicenter for the disease and followed in China and Iran’s footsteps by downplaying the scale of it and pushing back on experts’ warnings. Among the key challenges styming the Russian response to the coronavirus were the decision to centralize the health-care system, leading to the closure of many rural hospitals and healthcare centers, as well as the shortage of equipment. Some reporting has raised questions about possible manipulation of the death statistics; as was the case in Iran, the authorities appear to have omitted coronavirus deaths from their records. Moreover, under the guise of cracking down on “fake news”, the Russian government has targeted healthcare professionals, public-health experts, and journalists providing information deemed negative, a common authoritarian tactic to suppress inconvenient information.

Authoritarian actors are not the only ones advancing conspiracy theories and spreading inaccurate information about the coronavirus. Political and public figures, media personalities, and other actors on social media have all contributed to the infodemic. But authoritarian regimes have also used this environment to advance their own objectives, chief among them to erode public trust in democracy and to present their own systems as superior to those championed by the United States and its European allies.

The Alliance for Securing Democracy’s “Authoritarian Interference Tracker” defines information manipulation as

the coordinated use of social or traditional media to manipulate and influence public debate by deliberately spreading or amplifying information that is false, misleading, or distorted, and/or engaging in deceptive practices like masking or misrepresenting the provenance or intent of content, and/or intentionally suppressing information.

In addition to trying to rehabilitate their own images, actors like China and Iran were also pursuing three key objectives—leveraging tensions, widening the gap between the United States and Europe, and undermining the democracies’ capacity to tackle the pandemic in a coordinated manner—through framing and reframing public discourse. As George Lakoff put it in his book, *Don’t think of an Elephant*,

frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions.

Thus far these regimes have employed five main messaging frames worldwide to shape public discourse on coronavirus. These seek to rehabilitate the regimes’ images, seed doubt about the virus’ origins, shift the blame, highlight failures in democracies, and promote authoritarianism.

Successful framing and reframing changes perceptions, allowing authoritarian actors to influence not only public opinion but also the responses to the crisis formulated by their rivals and counterparts. The implications go beyond the crisis whose course they are designed to influence, however, and the regular political, economic, and even military efforts of these actors’ partners and rivals can also be affected. Democracies may see the negation of the frames as a relatively easy way to address the challenge. However, doing so often involves evoking the frame, thus serving to propagate it and even possibly reaffirm it. Research has shown that the more information is repeated, the more it seems true—this “illusory truth effect” holds even for information the recipient knows to be false initially. Democracies need to understand the objectives of authoritarians and the frames they deploy in order to address the challenge they pose effectively and even preemptively. This is best achieved through pro-active, timely and transparent communication and tailored policy responses.

The Objectives of Authoritarian Actors

Amid the coronavirus pandemic and dissatisfaction with the responses of some governments, certain actors, such as Russia, China, and Iran sought to leverage tensions and amplify the fissures within democratic societies—a consistent aim of authoritarians’ disinformation campaigns. All three divided their efforts between publishing content about the coronavirus and amplifying content about the latest racial tensions in the United States, the protests in the United States and Europe that followed after the brutal killing of George Floyd by

a police officer in Minneapolis, and the Trump administration's treatment of protesters. #GeorgeFloyd and #BlackLivesMatter were among the top 10 hashtags pushed by the three countries at the peak of protests and global attention to the issue in early June. The overlapping messaging on the topic of racial justice protests and the coronavirus crisis reached its peak between end of May and the first week of June.

In an attempt to revive discussions about California's secession from the union, Iran also undertook a campaign around #Calexit—a movement whose leader has a history of ties to other authoritarian regimes, having moved to Russia and sought support from China in the past. In Europe, several pro-Kremlin outlets sought to exploit the initial tensions between EU member states over their diverging approaches to handling the pandemic. Their divisive manipulated narratives were designed to push European countries further apart or at least to create an illusion of heightened divisions to undermine the European project. For instance, Sputnik Arabic claimed that the coronavirus in Italy stripped down European unity. And a Russian site, News Front, claimed that “refugees from Greek camps coming to Germany are infected with coronavirus and will jeopardize public health and safety.”

At the same time, these actors saw the coronavirus as an opportunity to widen the gap in between Europe and the United States. Some articles in the Russian state-backed media highlighted tensions in the transatlantic relationship as well as between the Western democracies and authoritarian regimes. Europe was a key audience for both China's “mask diplomacy” and Iran's messaging around U.S. humanitarian sanctions impeding its response to the pandemic.

A third objective was to undermine the capacity of democracies to tackle the global pandemic in their own countries and between democracies in a coordinated manner. Some manipulated narratives even referred to disintegration in the EU or attempted to turn citizens against the EU institutions in Brussels by claiming that the bureaucratic EU did not provide real help during the coronavirus epidemic. These narratives are among common tactics employed by pro-Kremlin outlets before the coronavirus crisis.

As authoritarian regimes found themselves at the center of international attention and condemnation for their inadequate responses to the global pandemic, they tried to distract from their botched responses at home and abroad. The result was an aggressive covert and overt information-manipulation campaign in state-run media and on social media platforms—many of which are banned in China and Iran. In spite of their differences (in terms of interests and audiences), authoritarian regimes shared five common messaging frames and enhanced each other's information manipulation efforts.

Frame 1: Rehabilitating China's Image

During the coronavirus pandemic, China undertook aggressive public diplomacy and information-manipulation campaigns designed to distract from its own failures and to shift the attention toward its rivals. While undermining the United States was clearly one of its main goals, its campaign also aimed to highlight the EU's initial hesitant and poorly coordinated response to the outbreak. Beijing's mask diplomacy targeted several countries around the globe, aiming to erase China's image as the origin of the disease. The campaign was also designed to help reframe existing narratives around the Chinese government's politicization of the virus and suppression of critical information about it, which had contributed to the propagation of the global pandemic.

The narrative of Beijing's failure was to be replaced with that of a benevolent and competent state, stepping in to provide aid not just to its own population but people all around the world during times of crisis. The provision of aid was accompanied by a robust propaganda campaign, aiming to show China as a benefactor. The dramatic increase in the number of Chinese official's accounts on social-media platforms, especially Twitter, which have more than quadrupled since last year's pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, demonstrates China's intensified efforts to influence public opinion globally. Chinese diplomatic accounts on social media highlighted the country's humanitarian aid, though much of it was in fact trade, and presented it as a competent, responsible, and benevolent global actor.

This messaging targeted U.S. allies, including European countries, Canada, and Australia, as well as countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. In Europe, Australia, and other democracies, China was eager not just to present itself as championing international relief efforts but also as an alternative to the United States. For example, as reports emerged that the Trump administration was outbidding European governments to obtain critical medical equipment such as respiratory ventilators, the Chinese government was stepping up its public aid campaign, providing countries like Italy with much-needed tests and masks.

What the Chinese messaging around mask diplomacy omitted was widespread quality-control issues leading to defective medical gear and testing kits exported by the country. Several European countries, including the Czech Republic, Finland, Slovakia, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom were among those that received such faulty items.

Frame 2: Questioning the Origins of the Virus

A second frame in disinformation efforts around the coronavirus, which was picked up and pushed by officials and state-backed media and social-media accounts from Russia, China, and Iran raised questions around the origins of the virus. In addition to denying the disease had originated in China, Chinese state media and accounts on social media implied and promoted a conspiracy theory tracing its origins to the United States and Italy. Circular amplification between the social-media accounts linked to Iran and China, as well as official statements and state-media reporting helped push this false narrative.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and several state-run media outlets also all dabbled in the conspiracy theory, especially the one related to the United States, often pointing to Chinese reporting. Some Iranian officials, state-media, and social-media accounts went even further, alleging that the United States had purposefully created the coronavirus to target its adversaries—pointing to the disease spreading in Iran and China. In addition, Russia Today contributed to the information chaos and spread other conspiracy theories such as that virus originated outside of Wuhan, though still in China, as well as stories about earlier propagation timelines and alternative ways of transmission.

Frame 3: Shifting the Blame

Russia, China, and Iran have all long found themselves a target of and objected to U.S. sanctions. But the spread of the coronavirus provided them with a new narrative around the United States' tool of economic pressure. Iran and China claimed that the sanctions were responsible for stymying public-health efforts to stop the spread of the pandemic. While there has been a notable absence of Russian claims that U. S. sanctions affected Russia's coronavirus containment efforts (partly also due to the country's previous claims that U.S.

sanctions had not been effective), there were numerous instances in which Moscow elevated similar claims related to those promoted by Tehran to shift the blame for its poor coronavirus response to the U.S. administration.

As the most heavily affected by sanctions of the three countries, Iran championed this theme in its propaganda efforts. Rights groups and experts (including one of the authors) have long warned about the U.S. government not doing enough to facilitate humanitarian trade with Iran and that sanctions were negatively impacting its ability to contain the spread of the virus. But Iran's position (and the disinformation campaign around it) was premised on the falsehood that U.S. sanctions directly target medical equipment, medicine, and other humanitarian items. The hashtags #EconomicTerrorism and #MedicalTerrorism were among those pushed by Iranian accounts on social-media platforms.

Frame 4: Highlighting Failures in Democracies

The fourth frame has seen Russia, China, and Iran highlight the failures of democracies, particularly the United States but also the EU. As the EUvsDisinfo portal of the European External Action Service, which analyzes pro-Kremlin disinformation trends, pointed out, the United States, the EU, and NATO have been targeted in the top five recurring disinformation narratives about the coronavirus. Examples of false claims include that the United States was a creator of the virus, that the EU failed to respond, and that the coronavirus was probably created by NATO. Other anti-EU and pro-Kremlin manipulated narratives focused on EU member states' lack of coordination.

China and Iran were especially eager to shift the conversation from their botched responses and to focus on the fast-growing number of coronavirus cases and deaths in the United States, as well as on the lack of adequate testing and preparedness there. The insufficient number of ventilators and images of supermarkets running out of basic items, such as toilet paper and cleaning products, circulated widely on state-media and social media accounts linked to these actors.

Frame 5: Promoting Authoritarianism over Democracy

The frame pertaining to the highlighting of failures in democracies has been further enhanced by that of the promotion of authoritarianism over democracy. Examples of this frame include statements by Russian state-backed media outlets implying that socialist countries such as Cuba have dealt with the epidemic much better than rich capitalist Western states. China took advantage of Western governments being consumed by the deteriorating health conditions in their countries to advertise to their publics the Chinese system as a model to the rest of the world by accentuating issues abroad in combination with promoting China's assistance to those countries.

Frames ingrain ideas in their target audiences, but they can only be effective if actors are willing and able to dedicate time and ensure consistency. Moreover, frames must be tailored to their audiences. Thus, the public discourse from China, Russia, and Iran during the coronavirus crisis did not use completely new frames and instead built on preexisting messaging that they had employed in other contexts and tailored it to the pandemic. For democracies, the implications of this could therefore be generalized for future public-health and other crises.

Implications

Public Health

Many are finding it more difficult to discern accurate information from falsehoods. During the first few months of the coronavirus pandemic, conspiracy theories exacerbated the challenges stemming from its spread. They led to mob attacks in India and poisonings in several countries, including when individuals followed President Donald Trump's suggestion that hydroxychloroquine could fight the virus—even as public-health officials said otherwise and discouraged the public from using the drug.

Using the blueprint they developed with the spread of coronavirus, authoritarians may leverage future public-health crises to their advantage if democracies do not develop their own blueprints for a response. The information environment resulting from the politicization of a public-health issue and the shadow cast over facts by key public and media figures can create a fertile ground to be exploited by authoritarian actors. If left unaddressed, this could complicate future public-health responses as trust in government-provided information and in the press plummets.

Recommendations: Democracies face a unique challenge when dealing with public-health crises. The reason for the botched responses to the coronavirus in many countries lies in the politicization of the issue. States have manipulated information for political purposes, complicating an effective response, which requires public attention and buy-in facilitated by access to accurate and timely information. At the same time, without political attention and capital, democracies would not be able to tackle the issue of information manipulation. Hence, democracies should depoliticize their public-health response and at the same time use and amplify authoritative and expert voices as well as devote sufficient funding to combatting information manipulation.

Democracy and Governance

Public trust in democratic institutions, facts, and data is undermined as authoritarians utilize the opportunities presented to them by public-health crises. According to a survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations, “respondents in all surveyed member states believe the EU responded poorly to the crisis – with majorities in all countries saying that the EU did not rise to the challenge.” This is fertile ground for perpetuating the frame of the EU as incapable of handling the coronavirus crisis (and, previously, other emergencies) in a coordinated manner, enabling malign actors to undermine its image and the authority of its representatives with amplification of manipulated narratives. This in turn can have vital consequences when the public does not adhere to the guidance issued by public-health officials and authoritative voices, and instead falls prey to manipulated information.

In addition to the public-health consequences associated with the coronavirus infodemic, polling has also consistently pointed to the broader challenges it poses to the health of democracies. According to the Pew Research Center, polls about the prevalence of made-up news on the coronavirus “suggest significant confusion and suspicion about information at a time when the course of the virus – and response to it – were evolving very quickly.” This has undermined the effectiveness of the government response while also making it more difficult for the public to trust in the government more generally. In an April 2020 Pew poll, approximately three-in-ten Americans said that the coronavirus was created in a lab, despite scientists determining otherwise—a conspiracy theory widely spread by Russian, Chinese, and Iranian state-backed media.

Recommendations: Democratic governments should invest in rebuilding citizens' trust in the democratic system through enhanced transparency. They should also increase efforts to improve citizens' media and digital literacy skills, which can lead to strengthened trust in democratic institutions and processes. These two issues are fundamentally connected. As the U.K. House of Lords Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies has argued, "We cannot teach people data literacy without transparency, or what to trust without authoritative markers of authenticity and expertise. So people's media literacy depends on how their digital environment has been designed and regulated."

Transatlantic Relations

China appears to have managed to rehabilitate its image to a degree. Some traditional U.S. allies now see it as a better partner in the fight against coronavirus than they do the United States or the EU. For example, in the Western Balkans, and especially in Serbia, billboards were erected to show gratitude for Chinese mask deliveries and Belgrade's Palace Albania was lit up with the colors of China's flag. Although the EU has been providing help to the Western Balkans through regional cooperation, and "promised a 'robust economic and investment plan' for the region to recover from the coronavirus crisis—on top of the 3.3 billion euros in emergency funding that the EU already mobilized for the region", no such billboards were set up before or during the pandemic to thank it, as the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, has pointed out.

At the same time, according to public opinion surveys conducted by the Bertelsmann Foundation, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and the Institut Montaigne, in the United States, France, and Germany, China is seen as more influential but also more negatively following the outbreak of coronavirus—pointing to the limits of its efforts to rehabilitate its image.

It is difficult to identify the cause and effect of these trends with complete certainty and these facts should not be seen in a vacuum (the transatlantic alliance has been under stress independently from these actors' efforts) but a public-health crisis is a stressor that these authoritarian actors have exploited and are likely to do so again in the future.

Recommendations: Information manipulation is most effective when there is an information void that can get exploited by malign actors. As these actors adapt their tools and tactics, and weaponize or manipulate information to their advantage, to elevate their image or undermine the trust in democracies, authoritative democratic and expert voices need to be more present in a variety of national and local media and engage with wider audiences across various national public spheres.

In Europe, transnational coverage where European representatives reach out more systematically to national audiences and better connect EU challenges and solutions with the national ones, represents a valuable opportunity to ensure a sustainable and cohesive European public sphere which should be further built with sustainable and better coordinated policy efforts. This will also help mitigate a vulnerability in the form of an absence of information, which tends to be exploited by malign actors as during the pandemic.

In the United States, the absence of a coherent federal response and inconsistent provision of information in different states has also created an environment of distrust of democratic institutions, the press, and expert

voices, leading many Americans to resort to relying on manipulated information. To tackle this, the government should formulate a more coherent approach at the federal level and disseminate accurate and timely information in an apolitical manner from the outset of a public health emergency.

About the Author(s)

Nad'a Kovalčíková is a program manager and fellow at the Alliance for Securing Democracy in GMF's Brussels office. Ariane Tabatabai is the Middle East Fellow at the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author(s) alone.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.



Ankara • Belgrade • Berlin • Brussels • Bucharest
Paris • Warsaw • Washington, DC