Dissertation Summary: Essays on Media Bias and Government Control of Media
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Despite the importance of press freedom to democracy, the widespread use of media control and regulation allows autocratic governments to influence public action that further their political or ideological goals. In recent years the increased usage of handheld devices and greater broadband penetration provides citizens with greater access to news reports from foreign media, as well as greater efficiency in organizing public action that holds government accountable for reports made by controlled media. My dissertation focuses on the bias behavior of government controlled media in response to the emergence of these two events. In particular:

1) How does the entry of foreign media affect the quality of information provided by government media?
2) How does higher government accountability affect the reporting behavior of government media?

The first portion of my dissertation addresses the entry of inaccurate foreign media on government media bias. I follow Gehlbach and Sonin (2009) approach where government media is tasked to maximize citizen’s support, and that they can influence it by misreporting the true state. The imperfectly informed foreign media here serves as additional information source that removes government’s role as the sole provider of information and alters bias in government controlled media. I show that foreign media tends to lower government media bias. However, when quality of government is low, foreign media can exacerbate local media bias. The resulting deterioration in local media quality can outweigh the additional information from a foreign media of moderate quality, leaving citizens worse off. In addition, I extend the model to analyze government decision to suppress foreign media and found that suppression is heavily used in countries with moderate quality of governance.

The second portion of my dissertation studies the bias behavior of government media that is concerned of its future reputation. Though governments can distort media reports to advance its political or ideological goals, it can hurt its reputation of promising unbiased reporting from local media. I follow Morris (2001) two-period framework where citizen cannot tell whether if the incumbent government cares of unbiased local media reporting (good), or uses local media to advance government’s agenda (bad). I extend Morris (2001) model in two different directions. First, I incorporate a simple voting process whereby representative citizen elects governments based on its current reputation. Though the voting process reduces local media bias under bad government, it also creates a perverse incentive in which local media are forced to report ‘politically correct’ events and allow incumbent government to survive the voting process. Furthermore the voting process can eliminate certain informative equilibrium that hurts representative citizen that relies on local media report to make informed decision.

The second extension to Morris (2001) is the introduction of an imperfectly informed foreign media into the two-period model. Similar to the first portion of my dissertation,
foreign media serves as an additional information source, and local media plays a smaller role in influencing citizen’s action. Again in most cases, foreign media can lower bias in local media report. However when reputation concerns is small, foreign media’s entry can increase bias in local media report.

In short, my dissertation yields results that accepted beliefs that foreign media entry and increase government accountability can temper bias in local media report. In low quality government, foreign media can provoke higher local media bias to a point where the deterioration of local media quality outweighs the additional information provided by foreign media with moderate quality. Even in repeated interaction where government’s reputation matters, bias in local media report can be higher with foreign media entry. In the case of higher government accountability, local media bias is lower, but it also creates incentive for local media to bias and report “politically correct” events to improve its reputation.

Reference