

Authoritarians on the Airwaves

State control over news content and its delivery mechanisms has long been a key feature of authoritarian systems. Recognizing that a genuine competition of ideas and a well-informed public spell trouble for regime security, authoritarian rulers devote extensive resources to managing and manipulating the news. Among the 21st-century variations of this strategy is the emergence of state television broadcasts aimed at overseas audiences. These initiatives—including *Russia Today*, Iran’s *Press TV*, and Venezuela’s *Telesur*—are part of a broader effort by leading authoritarian states to project their influence beyond national borders. China, meanwhile, has embarked on its own ambitious plan to shape international views.

Russia Today: The television channel Russia Today is a Kremlin initiative that broadcasts to North America, Europe, and Asia. It is overseen by the state-controlled RIA Novosti news agency, and at the time of its global launch in 2005, it reportedly had a staff of over 300 and \$30 million in start-up capital.¹ As of May 2008, the Russian government was believed to have invested some \$100 million in the project.²

Iran’s Press TV: Iran launched the 24-hour, English-language satellite station Press TV in 2007, with a reported worldwide staff of 400 people.

Venezuela’s Telesur: Launched in 2005, Venezuela’s Telesur is a multimillion-dollar, 24-hour cable news network designed to advance “a new international communications order,” according to Venezuela’s minister of information.

China’s Growing International Media Ambitions: China’s state-controlled news organizations anticipate spending billions of dollars on expanding overseas media operations in a bid to improve the country’s image abroad. The plans include opening more overseas bureaus, publishing more content in English and other languages, and hiring English-speaking Chinese and foreign media specialists. The Chinese government in January 2009 announced plans to launch an international, 24-hour news channel with correspondents around the globe.³ According to reports in early 2009, the government had reportedly set aside between \$6 billion and \$10 billion for this and other media expansion efforts.⁴ China Central Television (CCTV), which currently holds a monopoly on television coverage of significant news in China, will multiply its channels from the present 13 to more than 200, all of them digital.⁵

¹ Robert Parsons, “Russia: New International Channel Ready to Begin Broadcasting,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 9, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1063693.html>.

² Stephen Heyman, “A Voice of Mother Russia, in English,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/arts/television/18heym.html>.

³ David Barboza, “News Media Run by China Look Abroad for Growth,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/15/business/worldbusiness/15tele.html>.

⁴ Peter Ford, “Beijing Launching a ‘Chinese CNN’ to Burnish Image Abroad,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 5, 2009, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0205/p01s01-woap.htm>.

⁵ Rowan Callick, “Xinhua Gets \$10b to Promote China’s Image to the World,” *Australian*, February 23, 2009, <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/business/story/0,,25090782-7582,00.html>.