Propaganda Responds to Foreign News Access

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Abstract :
This paper studies how access to foreign news affects domestic news in a context with low media freedom. I compile a dataset of hundreds of thousands of articles published in Chinese online newspapers. Relying on natural language processing techniques, I build different proxies for an article's alignment with domestic narratives in contrast to foreign narratives. Exploiting short-term shocks to the accessibility of foreign news, I show that ease of access leads domestic news to become more similar to foreign news. This converging effect is particularly salient for domestic back-pages -- compared to domestic front-pages. Overall, my results are consistent with a censorship strategy that differentiates between a less attentive majority (that does not actively search for different sources of information) and a more investigative minority (that does exploit the eased access to foreign news).