


# Chapter 4


## Scholars as Disinformation Agents: Unmasking Academic Propaganda for Authoritarian Venezuela

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores how disinformation is propagated by scholars who act as Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) agents. Focusing on the Venezuelan presidential elections of July 2024, it analyzes the behavior of a network of Ibero-American academics and intellectuals who actively disseminated regime-aligned narratives online. This chapter shifts attention to digital advocacy, where academic credibility is leveraged to legitimize authoritarian propaganda. Using the framework of Public Diplomacy in authoritarian contexts, the study applies a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis with Social Network Analysis (SNA). The dataset comprises all posts on X (formerly Twitter) from 17 selected individuals between July 15 and August 1, 2024. The findings reveal how academic figures contribute to disinformation campaigns, calling for greater scholarly engagement with the risks of authoritarian influence in knowledge production and democratic discourse.*

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-9601-8.ch004

## INTRODUCTION

Authoritarian regimes have refined their strategies to shape audience perceptions. Propaganda and disinformation campaigns aimed at national and international audiences are meticulously crafted to legitimize and secure their rule. At the same time, these regimes work tirelessly to discredit critics, portraying dissenting voices as unreliable or hostile (Walker & Ludwig, 2017).

While the internet and traditional media remain the primary tools for spreading propaganda and disinformation, other seemingly less far-reaching mechanisms, such as cultural exchanges and international conferences, can be equally effective. These spaces foster personalized connections between authoritarian regimes and foreign civil society actors, establishing bonds that are often more resilient and enduring (Kalathil & Boas, 2003).

Authoritarian propaganda has also penetrated the academic world, influencing research and scientific discourse (Cilano Peláez et al., 2021). Nowadays, studies carried out by academics, think tanks, and intelligence agencies highlight strategies employed by regimes such as China, Cuba, and Russia to recruit academics and intellectuals into their spheres of influence (Camero Guevara et al., 2023). Once aligned, these individuals act as both producers and disseminators of propaganda, targeting foreign audiences to legitimize authoritarian narratives (Brady, 2015).

This chapter examines the role of Ibero-American academic and intellectual circles in disseminating pro-regime propaganda online during the Venezuelan national elections in July 2024. The case is particularly relevant, as linguistic and cultural barriers frequently obstruct external researchers from comprehending the intricate dynamics of these communities. The study further investigates the actions and narratives employed by a group of such individuals throughout the electoral process, offering a detailed temporal analysis. Finally, it calls attention to a concerning trend: the infiltration of disinformation into academic discourse, a phenomenon that erodes institutional credibility and public trust.

Our guiding research question was: *What narratives did foreign academics and intellectuals affiliated with Venezuela's regime promote during the country's elections?*

This study is framed by Public Diplomacy, a core concept in International Relations that examines state strategies to influence foreign audiences through non-state actors. To analyze the data effectively, the research applies mixed-methods content analysis alongside social network analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of the collected dataset.

Given the insufficient scholarly examination of academics supporting authoritarian regimes in Latin America, the Venezuelan case holds particular significance. Consequently, several vital subjects remain unaddressed here, highlighting a limitation and potential pathway for subsequent studies.

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