ECONOMICS

Propaganda for nation-building

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Government propaganda often calls to mind ideas of nefarious efforts to undercut society, but can it also improve social cohesion after periods of conflict?

Arthur Blouin, of the University of Toronto, and Sharun Mukand, of University of Warwick, show that exposure to government-controlled radio broadcasts aimed at building national identity in Rwanda are associated with decreased

cleavages along ethnic lines. The authors conducted a field experiment in 52 Rwandan villages in which participants completed surveys, made trust decisions and interacted face to face. Using variation in the strength of radio signals due to geographic features, the authors estimated exposure to government radio propaganda at the local level. Participants who were exposed to state propaganda relied less on ethnicity when categorizing others, were more likely to select members of the other ethnicity as partners for a task, reported more trust in the other community, and made larger offers in trust games that were played privately. The pattern of results for behaviour and attitudes towards one's own ethnicity suggested that exposure to propaganda specifically improved inter-ethnic relationships, rather than simply raising levels of trust in general.

These results provide evidence that government media messages can have potentially beneficial effects on the salience and role of ethnic identities in society. The study opens the door to future research on the effects of nation-building propaganda in a wider variety of media and political environments.

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