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IN THIS ISSUE

Letter from the Director

Dr. Elton Skendaj

Welcome to this year's edition of *Democracy & Society*, the result of the hard work of Editor-in-Chief Leesa Danzek, Editor Charlene Batlle, and Assistant Editors Paige Maylath and Isabella Absi, as well as our Spanish Translations Fellow, Daniel Tomas, who reviewed, translated, and edited pieces submitted in Spanish. The 2023-2024 academic year was a period of growth and consolidation at the Democracy & Governance Program. Our Assistant Director, Bryson Daniels, streamlined our management practices, as well as designs the layout of this journal. I am also grateful for the hard work of the program staff and student workers Milan Bailey, Katja Volz, and Ruwaidah Maudarbux. In fall 2023, we welcomed our 18th class of incoming students. You can find more information about the events and developments of the year in the Program Highlights section of this issue.

Joshua Allen and Kristine Baekgaard highlight how technology-facilitated gender-based violence is an antidemocratic force. They argue that this creates gendered chilling effects in politics through the uneven distribution of vulnerability and harm as an instrument in authoritarian toolkits of digital repression.

Evan Mann argues in his "The Digital Repression Loophole" article that electoral autocrats are weaponizing technology as they are more likely to use spin than fear. Autocrats use such tools to identify opposition and prevent it from mobilizing. Mann hypothesized that such digital repression is less costly to the international reputation of the autocrat than outright physical harm of political opponents.

Olivia Brown's contribution highlights how the Chinese Communist Party employs advanced technology to repress Uighur minorities in Xinjiang Region. Mass surveillance systems, aided by innovative artificial intelligence, enable the Communist Party to commit human rights abuses. She advocates for working with private corporations to limit such abuses through democratic institutions to limit technology in human rights abuses.

Pip Baitinger's article, "The Homonationalistic Underpinnings of Surveillance Technology," examines the surveillance-enabled classification and oppression of Middle Eastern and immigrant communities rooted in the Orientalist feminization of Middle Eastern men, marketization and commodification of gender and sexuality, and immigrant identities.

Scott Ludwig's contribution, "Unprincipled Peaceniks: Russian Influence in the Modern Anti-War Movement," investigates internet traffic volume between Russian state propaganda outlets and prominent left- and right-wing media outlets that openly oppose US military aid for Ukraine. He finds that libertarian, nationalist, and conspiratorial online communities are an overlooked target audience for Russian State propaganda narratives.

Desiree Winns' contribution, "Social Media and the Digitization of Political Martyrdom," examines how the spread of social media news of the death of civilians has become a strategy for turning a tragedy into social movements. Such digital martyrdom unites communities by encouraging empathy with others.

Pedro Huet's contribution argues that some Mexican state authorities use contemporary social technologies to misinform the population for political gain. Such misinformation contributes to democratic erosion in Mexico, to which the author suggests placing limits on this use of media by state actors.

Elaine Melgarejo explores the impact of collective memory of the Cuban Revolution, diaspora, and media's influence in voter opinions

to comment on the influence of Spanish language media on the political preferences of South Florida's Cuban American community.

Anna Matos Mathis' article on counter-hegemonic projects through feminist film production contextualizes a woman-only film collective in response to misogynist and capitalist structures of British and American politics and film in the late 20th Century.

Nishita Karun proposes a randomized field experiment to enhance democracy in India, arguing for an independent, accessible, and public platform that can help citizens register grievances to facilitate accountability for governments.

Pablo Esteban Lopéz offers a theoretical review of digital society's implications for political communication and democracy, highlighting the impact of microtargeting on the personalization of political messages, electorate segmentation, and the consequential rise of ethical and political issues.

Facundo Robles' contribution, "Latin America Facing the Crossroads of Disinformation in the Era of Digital Democracy," examines Latin America's challenges regarding disinformation and trust in democracy. This piece centers the role of misinformation during electoral cycles and how it compromises trust in institutions and the democratic process, while arguing for a collective effort to preserve truth and strengthen trust in democratic institutions in the digital age.

We hope you will enjoy this issue, and we invite you to contribute to the guest column at www.democracyandsociety.net. You can find more information about the Democracy and Governance Program at our website: https://government.georgetown.edu/democracy-and-governance/.

Elton Skendaj, PhD, is the Director of the Democracy & Governance Program.

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence

Joshua Allen and Kristine Baekgaard

A problem for democracy

Abstract

Although the fields of democracy and authoritarian studies have become increasingly attentive to how new technologies can be used for anti-democratic purposes, they have tended not to examine technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) as an outgrowth of the increasing digitalization of political life. In this article, we argue that TFGBV is a distinctly anti-democratic force and explain why research on democracy, authoritarianism, and technology should address it alongside other emerging themes (e.g., mis/disinformation, AI, and digital surveillance) as a problem for democracy. We illustrate (1) how TFGBV, like gender-based violence more broadly, creates gendered chilling effects in politics through the uneven distribution of vulnerability and harm and (2) how TFGBV is a central, if infrequently acknowledged, instrument in authoritarian toolkits of digital repression. This article brings a gender lens to this volume's "digital platforms and civil society" and "institutions and digital technology" themes, highlighting how, both online and offline, gender constitutes a field of power that unevenly polices women's and queer individuals' access to the political realm, differentially structures exposure to violence and offers myriad symbolic resources that political leaders, both authoritarian and (nominally) democratic, can mobilize to bid for legitimacy.

Introduction

Although the fields of democracy and authoritarian studies have become increasingly attentive to how new technologies can be used

for anti-democratic purposes, they tend not to examine technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) as a similar antidemocratic outgrowth of the increasing digitalization of political life. In this article, we argue that TFGBV is a distinctly anti-democratic force and explain why research on democracy, authoritarianism, and technology should treat it alongside other emerging themes (e.g., mis/disinformation, artificial intelligence, and digital surveillance) as a problem for democracy.

We begin by defining what TFGBV is and distinguishing it from other forms of violence. Next, we illustrate how TFGBV, like gender-based violence (GBV) more broadly, creates gender and sexual-identity-based inequalities in politics through the uneven distribution of vulnerability and harm and, consequently, reshapes the terrain of political competition to the detriment of women and queer individuals. Then, we highlight how TFGBV is a central, if infrequently acknowledged, instrument in authoritarian toolkits of digital repression. We conclude with suggestions for further areas of research.

Conceptualizing TFGBV

TFGBV encompasses acts of violence "carried out using the Internet and/or mobile technology that har[m] others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms."[1] Including such acts as online harassment, cyberstalking, sextortion, and image-based sexual abuse (e.g., the nonconsensual circulation of intimate photos),[2] TFGBV is distinguished from other forms of violence in two ways.

First, as *gender-based* violence, TFGBV leverages gender to perform the work of violence. By this we mean that gender, as a cultural construct and as a host of uneven, structurally defined power positions between men, women, and queer individuals, serves as the generative cultural and political-economic substrate from which this violence draws. For instance, deploying gendered ideologies, such as sexism and transphobia, and gendered languages, including what Farrell et al. identified as "lexicons of misogyny,"[3] TFGBV draws from a depth of available symbolic resources that render this violence culturally intelligible, pattern it, and serve as "normalizing" worldviews that legitimize it.[4]

Second, as *technology-facilitated* violence, TFGBV is shaped by the technological structures that make it possible. The "spacelessness" of digital technologies – how, as mediating structures, they enable modes of contact and interaction impossible under the limits of 'normal' physical space – recontours gendered terrains of risk both online and offline.[5] As Marganski and Melander (2021) argued, "Inherent in the virtual world are larger systems and interactions within those systems that imitate those in the real world" (e.g., racial and gender biases in machine-learning algorithms),[6] and, likewise, what occurs "online" is indelibly a constitutive part of the "offline." With distance collapsed, perpetrators no longer need to "be [physically] present to aggress against their target,"[7] and the medium of the Internet has, among other things, greatly enlarged actors' capacities to stalk, surveil, and harass others.

While GBV is, as we'll show, a common feature of political life, the radical influence that new technologies have on contemporary political practice suggests that these technological transformations have generated new terrains for TFGBV in particular.

The Chilling Effect of TFGBV

A chilling effect refers to the capacity of power to "'chill' or discourage people from speaking or acting," discouraging certain acts by deterring some through threats of harm and encouraging others with the rewards of norm-compliance.[8] Chilling effects become gendered when they (1) involve gender-differentiated targeting, which creates unequal distributions of risk and harm; (2) use and derive their effectiveness from gendered ideologies, such as misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia; and (3) produce gender-unequal states of affairs, such as male dominance in political institutions.

Both online and offline violence and harassment against women and queer individuals create

targeted atmospheres of hostility and risk, selectively police speech and action, carve out zones of political exclusion, and secure what is typically a status quo favoring cisgender, heterosexual, and racial/ethnic-majority men.[9] For instance, violence against women in politics is ubiquitous, tends to deploy distinctly misogynistic and sexualized messaging to accomplish its "chilling" work,[10] and has as its ultimate aim the exclusion of women from the political sphere.[11] A 2016 IPU study found that, of surveyed women parliamentarians, nearly 66% had been targeted with sexual/sexist remarks, 44% with threats of death, rape, beatings, or abduction, and 42% reported that abusive images of themselves were circulated on social media – acts that they "believed. . . had been intended primarily to dissuade them and their female colleagues from continuing in politics."[12]

These kinds of GBV constrain women's and queer individuals' political prospects by fragmenting and suffocating queer and feminist movements and reinforcing politics as a heterosexual- and male-dominated domain. A 2014 UN Women study found that, in India, Pakistan, and Nepal, 60% of respondents indicated that women do not participate in politics due to the fear of violence.[13] In the 2008 Malawi elections, widespread harassment led more than half of the women running in the primaries to drop out.[14] Although queer individuals are active in social movements and activist campaigns, they often confront such intense social, political, economic, physical, sexual, and legal violence that involvement in formal politics is simply an impossibility in many countries.[15]

Although its technologically mediated aspect gives TFGBV an aura of historical novelty, it is the modulation and extension of this well-worn "chilling" violence through the technological structures that now increasingly mediate major domains of political practice. TFGBV recreates these unequal distributions of risk and harm in digital spaces, which then impact offline politics. For instance, in Ferrier's 2018 study, nearly 40% of surveyed female journalists indicated that they avoid reporting on certain topics due to the prospect of online harassment.[16] During debates to legalize abortion in Argentina in 2020, one in three women were subjected to violence on social media, which acted as a "muzzle" and caused many to withdraw from online discourse altogether.[17] Physical attacks are often preceded by online attacks,[18] which serve a signaling function by drawing attention to particular targets.[19] Compounding social marginalizations intensify online violence, as queer individuals, women from racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, and women with disabilities frequently experience "both the highest rates and most severe impacts of online violence."[20]

The reality of TFGBV shatters the myths that technology uniformly levels social hierarchies and that the digitalization of politics necessarily represents a democratization of politics for *all* people, for TFGBV feeds on, creates, and, indeed, is a *measure* of online and offline social hierarchies. Reinforcing a broader array of political marginalizations, including unequal access to campaign funds,[21] important political networks,[22] and decision-making processes,[23] that women and queer individuals confront even in consolidated democracies, TFGBV and GBV more broadly show precisely where and how the dynamics of contemporary democratic competition do not occur on an even playing field. If the use of force against officials, candidates, and ordinary people is considered *per se* incompatible with democratic processes, then the historical and contemporary ubiquity and persistence of GBV – and, now, TFGBV – show where those conceptualizations have tolerated types of violence that were not believed to undermine the foundations of democratic life.

Repressive Technology: Authoritarian Uses of TFGBV

It is widely recognized that new technologies, while enabling new forms of mass mobilization, coordination, and popular resistance (e.g., the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo), also offer authoritarian governments a sophisticated set of tools for monitoring populations, regulating dissidence, and performing ideological work through propagandization and information control. As Cebul and Pinckney

observed, digital technologies have improved the state's ability to "read" populations, shrunk autonomous spaces of coordination, and increased the costs of regime defection.[24] Social registries, facial recognition systems, and AI-powered analytics capable of processing immense amounts of data allow authoritarian governments to granularly monitor dissidence and, with such tools as keyword blocking, police and censor populations without resorting to costly displays of violence.[25]

Less widely recognized is how TFGBV also forms a core part of authoritarian strategies of digital repression *and* political legitimation. For example, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) uses so-called "sockpuppet" accounts (i.e., profiles not explicitly associated with the user controlling them)[26] to inundate diaspora Chinese women journalists and other women journalists of Asian descent living abroad with misogynistic, homophobic, sexualized, and racist messages, imagery, and threats.[27] The CCP has also used its influence over Chinese tech companies to censor women who have spoken about sexual harassment and gender inequality by removing posts, enforcing topic and keyword bans, and flooding the digital space with ultranationalist content.[28]

In Afghanistan, Afghan Witness found that, following the Taliban's takeover, prominent Afghan women experienced a 217% increase in online hate speech and abuse, with the majority coming from profiles associated with low-ranking Taliban members and pro-Taliban users.[29] Spikes in this abuse corresponded with the women's attendance at protests, suggesting a deliberate, organized effort to intimidate them.[30] Control over physical hardware is also a core element of the Taliban's digital repression strategies. According to Human Rights Watch, the Taliban have sought to prevent women from accessing the Internet *at all* by decreeing that they should have access only to phones that are not Internet-compatible.[31]

Examining the empirical manifestations of TFGBV reveals not only how authoritarian strategies of digital repression are gendered in both content and effect but also how the efficacy of these strategies often stems from how they tap into misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic beliefs to bid for legitimacy and mobilize support. Former President Donald Trump infamously staked claims about his "authenticity" on his open and unabashed misogyny, as did former President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines.[32] By targeting people, particularly women, on social media, Trump led his followers to inundate them with rape and death threats – a dynamic of outsourced coercion that not only chilled speech but was also instrumental for a much broader process of far-right community building.[33] Similarly, India's President Narendra Modi has a "Troll Army" that harasses female politicians who critique his political party.[34] As Nyst observed, with such "patriotic trolling," "states need only implicitly encourage [these] campaigns… to create an environment in which online hate mobs will self-ignite and self-sustain in pursuit of the government's own objectives."[35]

As Shaw noted, "[t]he political weaponization of homophobia and transphobia" – and, we'll add, misogyny – is "a useful national strategy for authoritarian leaders."[36] By not inquiring into how authoritarian strategies of digital repression play across and use particular social constructions of gender and sexuality, research risks overlooking not only important empirical variation but also how these strategies can draw from widely held misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic beliefs to create popular buy-in and, indeed, mobilization.

Conclusion

In line with the historical tendency to view GBV as a private rather than political issue,[37] TFGBV has been sidelined in many conversations about the challenges that technology poses to democracy. However, scholars working on technology, democracy, and authoritarianism must take TFGBV seriously. Digital violence reinforces and creates new patterns of political exclusion and is frequently used as a tool by authoritarian regimes to silence dissent and consolidate power.

While the dynamics that we've examined warrant further exploration, there are many other lacunae that still need to be addressed. What productive functions do misogyny and other restrictive beliefs around gender and sexuality serve in the far-right community formation online? How does TFGBV impact women's and queer individuals' ability to access the tools of digital democracy, such as e-voting? What are the gendered dynamics of mis/disinformation campaigns, particularly during elections? Answering such questions will, however, require researchers working at the intersection of democracy, authoritarianism, and technology to treat gender and sexuality more systematically as empirically and theoretically significant fields of power.

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The Digital Repression Loophole

Evan Mann

Why Electoral Autocrats are Weaponizing Technology

Introduction

Modern authoritarian regimes are fundamentally different from their 20th-century counterparts. Juan Linz's 1975 foundational work on autocracies, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, contains barely any reference to multiparty elections within authoritarian regimes and nothing even resembling the notion of competitive or electoral authoritarian regimes.[1] Terms such as "competitive authoritarianism" and "electoral authoritarianism" have risen in popularity and come to dominate the discourse surrounding

21st century authoritarianism.[2] The all-encompassing nature of these terms should come as no surprise: India's recent slide into electoral authoritarianism means that 68% of the world's population now lives in some form of an autocratic regime.[3]

However, alone, this notion of how modern autocratic regimes differ from their 20th century counterparts is insufficient. The world has undergone rapid technological growth in the past few decades. If the entirety of the 20th century saw advances in technology that many could never have imagined, the rapid proliferation of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), artificial intelligence, and machine learning only further this trend in the 21st century.[4] These trends were preceded by the "third wave of democratization" following the end of the Cold War, where politicians and scholars increasingly viewed the global landscape as amenable to democratic values and norms.[5] Further, many saw the onset of the ICT revolution at the turn of the 20th century as the herald of these democratic values, enabling citizens all over the world to hold their governments accountable by "empowering individuals and facilitating independent communication and mobilization."[6] However, both the inherent benevolence of technology and the inevitable progression toward democratic governance are increasingly being called into question, as autocratic regimes are learning to "harness technological change to advance regime objectives" and shore up the weaknesses that these technologies introduced.[7]

Understanding the ways that new forms of technology and autocracy interact is imperative. Autocracies and hybrid regimes around the world are increasingly implementing and weaponizing emerging digital technologies.[8] As these technologies and methods of "digital repression" become more efficacious and their price tags continue to decrease, the proliferation of these technologies will likely continue. As such, this paper deals with the following puzzle: How do digital forms of seemingly less coercive repression interact with violent repression in autocracies around the world? In answering this larger puzzle, this paper also responds to the argument that modern autocracies are less "fear-based" than 20th century autocracies and contends that, although techniques of digital repression are less "fear-based" than older forms of political repression, they still maintain coercive elements.[9]

21st Century Autocracy

First, it is worth providing a conceptual definition of electoral authoritarianism. The foundational basis for this term is built upon a "two-sided distinction" within multiparty regimes, as some are authoritarian and some are traditional democratic regimes.[10] The acknowledgment that authoritarian regimes can allow multiparty elections is crucial, even if the quality of these elections are very different from genuinely democratic multiparty elections. Secondly, the term differentiates between traditional, non-electoral autocratic regimes and autocratic regimes that hold multiparty elections. The presence of multiparty elections splits the category of authoritarian regimes, while the quality of these elections distinguishes them from electoral democracies.[11]

With these distinctions in mind, it becomes substantially easier to place electoral authoritarian regimes on the continuum of regime types between the opposing poles of closed autocracies and liberal democracies. Two symmetrical categories, electoral authoritarianism and electoral democracy, fill the gap between the opposing poles and capture substantial variations among regime types.[12] This categorization of electoral authoritarianism between closed autocracy and electoral democracy is emblematic of the conceptual differences outlined above.

Establishing electoral authoritarianism as a category and not simply a by-product of a democratic transition is vital. In fact, electoral autocracies may have genuine and widespread popular appeal in a myriad of contexts.[13] While many studies examining competitive and electoral authoritarianism treat regimes bearing these labels as "undergoing prolonged

transitions" to democracy, Levitsky and Way argue that these regimes should be viewed as coexisting with "meaningful democratic institutions" that are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority.[14] However, because the incumbent regime violates these rules and norms, the regime does not meet the conventional standards for democracy but continues to persist. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that while electoral autocracies can democratize, they can also stagnate as a hybrid regime or regress towards closed authoritarianism.

Particularly after the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the continuing backlash against liberalism and globalization, electoral authoritarianism has emerged as a "full-fledged alternative" to democracy and a mechanism for an "authoritarian resurgence" in polities once thought to be democratically consolidated enough to prevent autocratic takeover.[15] Although electoral authoritarianism was once thought to be "inherently transitional and unstable," there is now considerable consensus that it is a distinct and durable regime type.[16]

21st Century Repression

Next, it is necessary to provide a conceptual framework for what exactly digital repression comprises. Steven Feldstein provides a seminal definition that I will use for the purposes of this article. In it, he posits that digital repression is the "use of information and communications technology to surveil, coerce, or manipulate individuals or groups in order to deter specific activities or beliefs that challenge the state."[17] Feldstein divides digital repression into broader categories: surveillance, online censorship, social manipulation and disinformation, internet shutdown, and targeted persecution of online users.

Compared to older conceptual definitions of political repression, Feldstein's definition is quite similar, yet it represents a fundamental updating of the way political repression plays out in the 21st century. For example, take the oft-cited definition of state repression from Christian Davenport's survey of the repression literature. In it, he summarizes that repression involves the "actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and/or beliefs perceived to be challenging to government personnel, practices, or institutions."[18] While these two definitions have many similarities, the glaring omission of digital technologies from Davenport's definition should come as no surprise; much of the conceptual underpinnings of this definition stem from Robert Goldstein's 1978 book on political repression in America when the modern technologies driving Feldstein's work were still decades away.

Some of these categories of digital repression, like surveillance and censorship, are updated methods of older techniques, while others, like internet shutdowns, are new ways of repressing populations in the 21st century. Like traditional forms of repression, digital repression "raises the costs of disloyalty, enables leaders to identify their opposition, and restricts the ability of groups to mobilize against the regime."[19]

Modern Authoritarianism and Modern Repression

As recent events have seen, the "contemporary dictator practices electoral authoritarianism."[20] These autocrats increasingly have access to facial-recognition technologies that check real-time images against massive online databases and algorithms that track the online movements of regime dissidents, which are "game-changing" technologies for authoritarians seeking to "shape discourse and crush opposition voices."[21]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a very strong relationship between levels of liberal democracy and a given country's use of digital repression tactics. **Figure 1** makes clear that, as a country scores higher on Varieties of Democracy Institute's (V-Dem) "Liberal Democracy Index" (LDI), the country is substantially less likely to employ techniques of digital repression,

measured by Feldstein's Digital Repression Index (DRI), which analyzes how often a state employs techniques of digital repression across the world over the previous decade.[22]

Because these indices correlate so strongly, it is worth examining each in turn.[23] First, V-Dem's LDI is a composite index that seeks to quantify "to what extent is the ideal of liberal democracy achieved" in a given country-year.[24] This "high-level" index is comprised of two "low-level" indices: the first focuses on equality before the law, individual liberties, and the level of judicial and legislative constraints on the executive, and the second deals with political rights, including clean elections, suffrage, whether officials are elected, and the freedoms of association and expression.[25] The resulting "Liberal Democracy Index" runs from 0 to 1, with higher scores representing higher levels of liberal democracy. However, I have altered this scale to run from 0 to 100 for ease of interpretation.

Second, Feldstein's DRI is derived from the Digital Society Project's (DSP) coding of five means of digital repression that overlap with the five categories outlined above by Feldstein above.[26] To measure the level of digital repression a country uses in a given year, Feldstein makes use of variables from the DSP dataset: the extent to which the government surveils social media (Surveillance), the government's practical usage of Internet, social media censorship, and filtering (Censorship), the extent to which the sitting government or major political parties disseminate false information (Social Manipulation or Disinformation), the government's practical usage of internet and social media "shutdowns" (Internet Shutdowns), and the number of arrests made for online political content (Targeted Persecution of Online Users).[27] Finally, Feldstein aggregates these variables into one measure that runs from -5 to 5, with higher scores indicating higher levels of digital repression, and 0 representing the mean score for all country-years in the sample. Returning to **Figure** 1, the purple points in the bottom right, representing liberal democracies, are the least likely on average to implement policies of digital repression: they score exceptionally high on the LDI and low on the DRI. As a country's liberal democracy score deteriorates, however, the country is increasingly likely to utilize digital repression as a political or social tool. This finding is directly in line with standard expectations that autocracies are more likely to implement repressive measures and policies than democracies.

Figure 2 presents a global comparison of the mean Digital Repression Index broken into different regime categorizations, ranging from closed authoritarianism at one end of the spectrum to liberal democracy at the other. As expected, closed authoritarian regimes are by far the most likely to utilize tools of digital repression, while liberal democratic regimes, with their protections for individual liberties and civil and political rights, are the least likely.

Figure 3 presents V-Dem's "Civil Liberties Index" (CLI), defined and measured as the "absence of physical violence committed by government agents and the absence of constraints of private liberties and political liberties by the government."[28] While this index is an imperfect proxy for repression, it helps to illuminate how repression against a population manifests. This index is again disaggregated by regime type, and it shows a very similar story to that of the previous figure. Liberal democracies score the highest of the four regime types, with closed authoritarian regimes scoring the lowest. Taken together, **Figure 2** and **Figure 3** show that closed autocracies are the most likely to weaponize techniques of digital repression against their populations and the least likely to respect citizens' civil liberties. However, what these global comparisons are unable to show is any way of determining how digital repression manifests in relation to the civil liberties index within autocracies. **Figure 4** shows the relationship between the DRI and CLI indices in electoral and closed autocracies. While both regime types are more inclined to wield techniques of digital repression as their civil liberties score drops, electoral authoritarian regimes maintain a slightly higher score on both indices over the given timeline. As such, **Figure 4** suggests that digital repression is not wholly

supplanting older forms of political repression, or at least not doing so undetected. On the one hand, the former implies that autocracies that are wielding digital repression are still simultaneously using older forms of political repression. One the other hand, the latter would suggest that the V-Dem index used to measure civil liberties is picking up instances of digital repression and including it in the index, even if they do not explicitly state that digitally repressive acts are included.

Conclusions and Areas for Future Research

With the recent wave of democratic backsliding and the autocratization of hybrid regimes around the world, many new governments have or are primed to implement various forms of digital repression. Less invasive tactics will see increased usage, and while hybrid regimes are not as likely to pursue traditional political repression tactics as their fully autocratic counterparts, they are increasingly willing to employ specific digital repression methods to avoid the economic and normative consequences associated with older forms of political repression.[29]

The normative consequences of traditional political repression may also help to explain much of the recent shifts toward autocratic regimes that rely on "spin," not "fear."[30] Traditional forms of political repression, including murdering opposing politicians or holding political prisoners, are quickly and decisively condemned in the international system, often with severe economic or reputational consequences. However, no such international agreement is yet in place to counter digitally repressive actions, allowing modern autocrats to digitally repress without the threat of ramifications from the international system.

Autocracies based solely on "fear" are certainly declining in the 21st century, but it would be a mistake to conclude that the growing number of digitally repressive regimes contain no elements of "fear." Firstly, digital repression enables an increasingly invisible coercive presence in people's lives. While these techniques still contain their coercive and repressive capabilities, they are certainly not as menacing as the physical police presence that accompanied expansive political repression campaigns in the 20th century.[31] However, the ability of emerging technologies to surround an area while remaining relatively invisible is one of their strong points. Because of the omnipresent potential of digital repression, these technologies can "induce changes in behavior" and create a substantial "chilling effect even in the absence of sustained physical presence."[32] Understanding how citizens react to the threat (perceived or real) of digital repression is an area that is sorely in need of additional research.

Finally, the state can weaponize digital repression against minorities or opposition political groups while still maintaining the broad popular support of the majority. In this sense, it is a mistake to assume that digital repression will be wielded evenly across a population instead of targeted at those most susceptible to its effects. In this manner, one of the most critical areas for future research is understanding how, why, and when digitally repressive regimes target specific groups. Specific country contexts must be examined in detail to understand if the specific groups being targeted are entirely irrelevant to the electoral base of the autocrat or if their support is critical. There are solid reasons to believe both scenarios could call for digital repression, but understanding why this need exists and how the population reacts to it could have far-reaching implications for future situations.[33]

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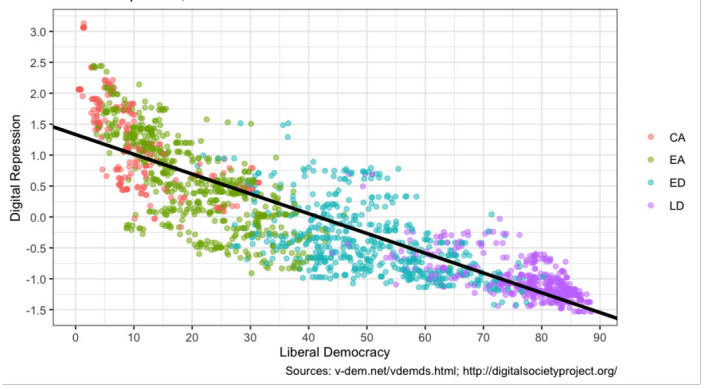
Appendix

Figure 1. Liberal Democracy and the Digital Repression Index

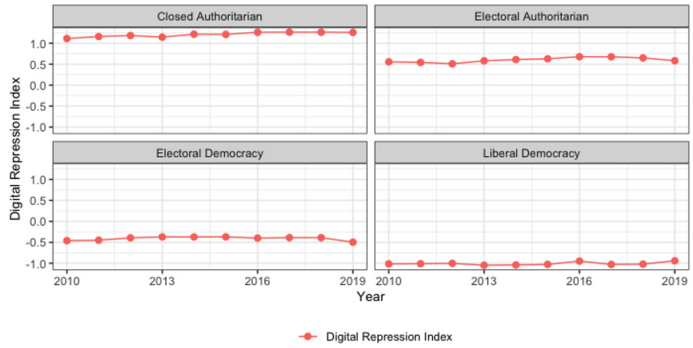
Global Comparision, 2010-2019



Sources: v-dem.net/vdemds.html; http://digitalsocietyproject.org/

Figure 2. Digital Repression Index Across Regime Types

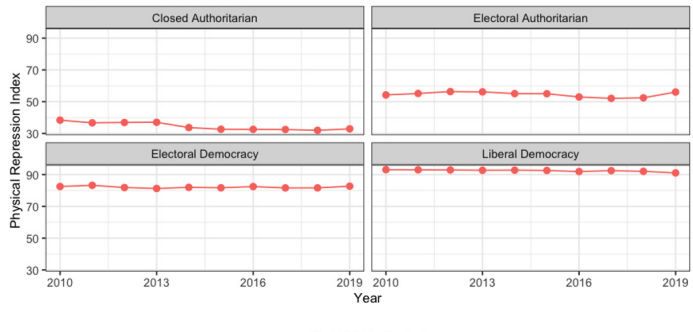
Global Comparision, 2010-2019



Sources: v-dem.net/vdemds.html; http://digitalsocietyproject.org/

Figure 3. Civil Liberties Index Across Regime Types

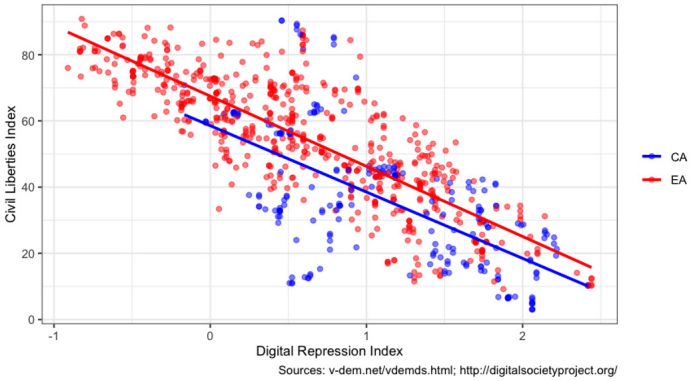
Global Comparision, 2010-2019



Sources: v-dem.net/vdemds.html

Figure 4. Autocracies and the DRI and CLI

Global Comparision, 2010-2019



Sources: v-dem.net/vdemds.html; http://digitalsocietyproject.org/

How to Stop the Uighur Genocide

Olivia Brown

Empowering the Private Sector in the Face of 21st Century Horrors

Abstract

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) actions towards the Uighur Muslim minority constitute genocide. The international community and other democratic institutions have not adequately addressed the CCP's behavior through policy. However, other approaches could disrupt the Uighur genocide. Businesses benefitting from the genocide face reputational and, therefore, economic risks. This paper argues that, to end the Chinese Communist Party genocide of the Uighur people and mitigate future human rights abuses, democratic institutions must consider innovative ways that empower the private sector to bring forth concerns impacting corporate reputation through a dispute system mandated in domestic law.

The CCP has successfully brought Orwell's *1984* to life in the Uighur genocide. Using surveillance cameras throughout China, the CCP scans residents for "Uighur traits" up to 500,000 times per month, ultimately deeming Uighur residents as "pre-criminals."[1] Mass dataveillance and artificial intelligence algorithms perpetuate a genocide against this Muslim community in East Turkistan, also known as the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China (XUAR). Creating a dispute framework for corporate accountability for companies unknowingly profiting from human rights abuses is a potential solution to end the genocide. This paper will demonstrate that ending the Uighur genocide perpetrated by the most technologically-advanced country in the world necessitates greater engagement with the private sector.

Dataveillance in the Camps, East Turkistan, China, and Abroad

The genocide against the Uighurs has already interned one to two million people under the guise of "re-education"[1] camps, marking the largest internment of a religious minority since the Holocaust.[2] Dataveillance, meaning the systematic monitoring of people's actions or communications through information technology, as defined by Robert Clarke in 1988, is ubiquitous in the internment camps.[3] Upon entry into the internment camps, the CCP takes internees' blood and urine samples, iris scans, photographs, fingerprints, DNA, and voiceprints.[4] Advanced camera and audio recording systems enable guards to remotely amplify their voices from outside the rooms to reprimand internees for covering their eyes to sleep or speaking anything but Mandarin.[5] In some cases, internees experienced rectal prolapses because guards monitoring the automatic dataveillance system forced them to sit still for so long.[6] Dataveillance and violation of the right to privacy enable the 'big brother' omnipotence of the CCP.

In East Turkistan, dataveillance permeates all aspects of life. The CCP fitted all cars with state-issued GPS trackers, forced residents to register for a new state-tracked ID, registered and checked all mobile phones, and analyzed Uighurs' behavior.[7] Using a home's back entrance more than the front or socializing too little or too much are considered suspicious.[8] Recently, the CCP has pivoted to forced labor. Uighurs not only toil in textile factories in East Turkistan, but also throughout greater China, where the CCP transferred 80,000 Uighurs from East Turkistan between 2017 and 2019.[9] Dataveillance is used by the CCP to track movements and behavior in labor camps, where Uighurs are prohibited from going outside of the factories and are forced to sleep in dorms on factory dorms.[10]

1. "Re-education camps" is the CCPs term for the places they imprisoned Uighurs and other minorities.

Abroad, the CCP supervise, blackmail, and even arrange deportations of Uighurs.[11] The CCP has effectively cut off East Turkistan by detaining Uighurs in the region for communicating with loved ones abroad.[12] The CCP proved dataveillance so effective that they no longer need the infrastructure of intrusive policing, military patrols, and checkpoints.[13] The CCP's ability to control what Uighurs do inside and outside the region disadvantages the public sector in holding the CCP accountable.

Current Failures of the Public Sector

The multilateral community is limited by their lack of enforcement mechanisms, the Uighur's lack of representation, and the CCP's deniability. Multilateral bodies, such as the United Nations (UN) and International Criminal Court (ICC), lack the ability to enforce international law on the CCP. Since the CCP has not ratified the Rome Statute,[2] and the ICC cannot intervene for actions committed "solely by nationals of China within the territory of China," the ICC has no jurisdiction to enforce or adjudicate.[14] The lack of jurisdiction also limits the ICC's ability to establish an International Criminal Tribunal to enforce international law. To further elucidate these limitations, consider how international law should address the CCP's invasion of Uighur privacy, a violation which underpins the genocide. According to international law, any violations of privacy by the state must be necessary, balanced, and suitable.[15] Historically, governments restrict the right to privacy in the name of anti-terrorism, which the CCP claims in the case of violating privacy of Uighur individuals.[16] However, the CCP's only criterion to be a terrorist is ethnic minority status, proven through the CCP's violations of privacy.[17] These violations are excessive, and yet, multilateral bodies like the United Nations (UN) and International Criminal Court (ICC) are unable to act due to the lack of enforcement mechanisms in international law.

Defending stateless individuals and communities, such as the case here, is particularly challenging as a result of their limited international representation in multilateral bodies. The Uighur Tribunal, established by the World Uighur Congress, can only review evidence to judge objectively whether the CCP committed international crimes. It must call upon others to apply the judgment in their dealings with the CCP.[18] Its lack of enforcement and advocacy confines its efficacy to address the genocide. Disinformation aides the CCP's deniability on the international stage, further hamstringing the multilateral community. In 2019, the CCP, facing international backlash, claimed to release Uighur internees.[19] However, rather than release Uighurs, the CCP sent many to the prison systems or forced labor.[20] For any dissenters, the CCP created a documentary full of disinformation titled, "Fighting Terrorism in Xinjiang."[21] Then, over thirty-seven countries, including those with abysmal human rights records, such as Russia, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, defended the CCP's actions in East Turkistan. This community of states has an interest in restricting democratic institutions from becoming instruments to address mass human rights violations, particularly those committed by large, competitive states.[22] Diplomacy is failing because China can retain its allies with plausible deniability. The responsibility for enforcing human rights must come through other avenues and from other organizations.

Options to Address the Genocide

Current avenues of diplomacy and existing laws are insufficient in ending the Uighur genocide, so new approaches should be considered. Leveraging the role of technology has various benefits and challenges. Legal frameworks that empower the private sector should be seriously considered for both short- and long-term solutions to the genocide.

An international cybersecurity law focused on the right to privacy and limiting what states

2. The Rome Statute treaty established the International Criminal Court, which prosecutes crimes against humanity as well as genocide.

can and cannot collect on their citizens is a potential way forward but would face barriers of commonality and enforcement. The law would mandate the Uighurs' right to privacy and, therefore, disempower the dataveillance that perpetrates the genocide. Currently, relevant international laws mainly address cyberwarfare, meaning the use of cyber for war or destruction, or cybercrime, as in the use of cyber for financial abuse. When the UN attempted to create such a law in their open-ended working group on developments in the field of information and telecommunications, that lack of commonality was evident. The working group ultimately refrained from adding an enforcement mechanism on technology used in a manner inconsistent with voluntary norms and international law. Therefore, any public sector move would face a significant enforcement barrier and require a time-intensive debate to establish norms.[23] Creating such norms could risk codifying the lowest common denominator, limiting relevancy, as it may not offer much protection.[24] Although such a law could significantly aid citizens worldwide, it is unlikely to stop the CCP's ongoing genocide in the near future, which actively interns and tortures ethnic minority Uighurs.

Targeting artificial intelligence (AI) is another regulatory route, as it is the tool of choice for mass identification of minorities. However, because AI itself is a multiuse tool at the behest of its users – where it can be used for both malicious and positive purposes – it can be fairly difficult to regulate. Thus, a multiuse regulatory structure would be another challenge to confront. In this case, AI algorithms underpin the dataveillance in the Uighur genocide, and without them, it would be near impossible for the CCP to achieve a genocide of this size. Regulations on AI algorithms like Megvii's[3] Face++, which identifies Uighurs, could significantly limit the extent of the Uighur genocide.[25] Unlike cybersecurity, the public sector is agreed upon the risks of AI, as the UN Secretary-General has stated that the malicious use of AI systems could cause horrific levels of death, destruction, and trauma.[26] However, as a multiuse tool, facial recognition algorithms utilized by the CCP are also employed in the private sector with better intent, as is the case in the beauty industry. One common example is that of cosmetic companies looking to make automated racialization a convenience in marketing lipstick to increase diversity and inclusion in their market base.[27] Thus, international law restricting AI training on racial information as a means to address genocide is inherently myopic in its harm of innocuous use. Thus, cybersecurity and AI legislation do not pose realistic solutions to this technologically-enabled genocide.

A legal framework that empowers private sector companies to bring claims against countries that put them at risk for reputational harm due to human rights violations is another approach to ending the genocide. Considering the proposed EU AI Liability Directive, which places the burden of proof on the company through 'presumption of causality,' this approach similarly allows companies to bring a case against those using and producing their tool as a means to ending human rights abuses.[28] Companies have a vested interest in how their products are used and created, as they are at risk for boycotts or other reputational risks when their due diligence fails. This framework could apply not only to the dataveillance and technological aspects enabling the Uighur genocide, but could also address the legal question of Uighur forced labor in foreign company supply chains. Unlike obstacles to human rights law carried out against countries, this approach incorporates enforcement clauses that empower companies headquartered in non-violator states. Chinese businesses would not be a party to these mechanisms when working domestically, but foreign businesses headquartered in other states would be. Linking the private sector and the law in this way provides businesses with an avenue to avoid reputational risk. In essence, this approach regulates the end – what the tool is used for – not the means – the tool itself.

CCP reliance upon the private sector is the

3. A Chinese company, also known as Mega Vision.

gateway to enforcing human rights law in China. The businesses supporting the Uighur genocide can be split into four categories: 1) Chinese businesses in East Turkistan that profit directly from Uighur forced labor, as in textiles;[4] 2) companies outside of China that utilize the aforementioned Chinese businesses in their supply chains;[5] 3) American social media platforms used by the CCP to perpetuate its narrative around the genocide;[6] and 4) Chinese and other international businesses that directly build the dataveillance empire utilized against the Uighurs.[7] For example, Cisco, Dell, HP, IBM, Microsoft, and Oracle are all household-name American companies supplying vital equipment to Chinese police departments throughout East Turkistan.[29] These foreign companies are foundational to the CCP's genocide. Companies are concerned about reputational risk as it can have significant financial impact. Therefore, there is an economic, as well as moral, imperative for any non-Chinese company doing business in China or any other country committing human rights abuses to support this idea. It may, in turn, minimize the CCP's ability to eradicate the Uighur people.

This framework is necessary because current legal structures are designed to address all forced labor in supply chains, rather than provide avenues to pivot for companies who discover it and aim to improve. Companies should perform due diligence to elucidate any human rights abuses for their own risk management when investing in or adding to their supply chain. Domestic laws help to enforce this, as a 2017 French law mandates that companies headquartered in France perform due diligence.[30] However, the CCP purposefully obfuscates supply chains and limits access to auditors, minimizing companies' abilities to ensure such supply chains are free from Uighur forced labor.[31] The CCP forced Uighurs out of the region to labor in electronics factories throughout China, further making due diligence more difficult.[32] Therefore, companies lose money through risks that they cannot mitigate, causing Apple, Nike, and Coca-Cola to lobby against the US Uighur Forced Labor Protection Act (UFLPA).[33] While such companies claim to abhor the atrocities in East Turkistan, they maintained concerns that legislation would wreak havoc on supply chains embedded in China.[34] Apple specifically wanted the UFPLA to require companies to release supply chain information to congressional committees and not the public, indicating that companies understand their increased reputational risk due to the CCP's actions.[35] The UK Court of Appeal recently ruled that the National Crime Agency's (NCA) refusal to evaluate goods imported from China for Uighur forced labor is unlawful, and that if a company knows or suspects that the imported goods were produced under criminal circumstances, companies may be prosecuted under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2022.[36] The UFLPA and this ruling by the UK Court of Appeal are fantastic starts, but companies maintain little recourse for increased risk that may be out of their control.

This framework's strength is creating a reward system for businesses ridding their supply chains of Uighur forced labor. Currently, companies' only course for action is to cease supply chains going through East Turkistan,

4. In 2023, the United States interdicted a thirteen-ton shipment of hair, which may have been partially harvested at the camps. First hand accounts verify that the camps shaved the internees heads because the Uighur culture believes long hair symbolizes good fortune. See The New Yorker for more details.

5. East Turkistan produces about a fifth of the world's cotton and more than 80% of China's cotton, significantly increasing the risk for any foreign firm supplying from the region to be abetting human rights abuses. See Byler for more details.

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which will not stop Uighur forced labor or the genocide as some of the factories are outside of the region.[37] Companies would have to stop investing in China altogether. Further, this system could benefit competition between businesses. Consider the chocolate industry, which is so rife with child labor that the only ethically sourced option, Tony Chocolonely, is at a financial disadvantage.[38] Giving companies a carrot and allowing them to potentially recoup their risk would make more companies engage in ethical and competitive behavior. Having both the carrot and the stick to motivate companies is better than only one.

Of course, this option faces obstacles of its own. As previously noted, the CCP is an immense disinformation machine. H&M and Nike faced boycotts in China when their comments expressing concern in the region surfaced.[39] Companies often refrain from making any political statements unless they are certain they will be perceived favorably. The CCP, as both the leader of the most technologically advanced country and one historically unkind to those passing judgment on their domestic issues, is a concerning adversary.[40] This system may go unused, if enacted at all. China may replicate any foreign business that leaves their market, a tough economic decision for those businesses. Yet, the CCP is destroying the Uighur people and culture. Companies doing business in China, empowered to bring cases against countries that use their products immorally, could protect themselves from economic backlash. To retain the private companies necessary for the CCP to project power and influence and avoid potential economic backlash, the CCP would be positioned to deviate from its current norms toward human rights. The world must leverage new approaches to end the Uighur genocide.

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The Homonationalistic Underpinnings of Surveillance Technology

Pip Baitinger

The past decade has seen an enormous shift in access to certain institutions for LGBTQI+ people within many Western neoliberal states. According to a report by the Williams Institute from 2021, 56 countries have experienced increased support and acceptance toward

LGBTQI+ people.[1] From access to marriage equality to the ability to openly serve within their nation's military, LGBTQI+ individuals of many nations can now enjoy some semblance of equality.[2] Greece is the most recent sign of these growing attitudes of acceptance, with it being the first Christian Orthodox country to legalize same-sex marriage.[3] However, increased access to institutions and rights within the neoliberal nation-state may only be beneficial for some LGBTQI+ individuals who can conform to the expectations of such institutions. Conceptions of cisgender, white, and masculinized queerness under neoliberal institutions are combined with Western Orientalist conceptions of Middle Eastern sexuality and gender.[4] Such a combination subjugates other individuals who do not conform to these Western neoliberal binaries of sexuality and gender, both engraining neoliberal and Orientalist narratives and reinforcing them into the technologies modern society creates. These biases and cultural narratives manifest in the form of biometric and surveillance algorithms, allowing the construction of anyone outside of sexuality and gendered binaries to be labeled as a terrorist and dangerous through deception.[5] This reinforces the narratives used to construct such machines in the first place, paving the way for their implementation into the new political economy of surveillance capitalism.

In visualizing how states and firms implement algorithms baked in with these cultural biases and representations, it is first necessary to point to the neoliberal market structures and cultural representations that are transfixed on LGBTQI+, Middle Eastern, and immigrant peoples and identities. The Orientalist feminization of Middle Eastern men and sexualities as exotic is painted in contrast to Western sexuality indicates "moral geographies."[6] Moral geographies are illustrated and defined by Melani McAlister as "cultural and political practices that work together to mark not only states but also regions, cultural groupings, and ethnic or racial territories."[7] In this piece, she also describes the gross misrepresentation of Middle Eastern people in Western media. Such communities were often painted as innately corresponding to the feminine and their sexualities as decadent and exotic through film and media.[8] McAlister describes how binary this cultural mapping is, pinning it as East versus West, feminine versus masculine, and the like.[9] These moral geographies conceptualized by Western media continue and grow in impact as part of the United States' counterterrorism efforts post-9/11.

Toby Beauchamp details how the United States transfixes instances of these moral geographies into counterterrorism measures like the Real ID Act of 2005, a policy that strictly defined the identities of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, along with immigrants and Middle Eastern people.[10] The United States government ramped up such strict classification methods within its counterterrorism efforts. Methods that often equated terrorists as those who subvert gender norms or cross-dress as a form of deception to bypass surveillance systems were often continuously implemented into such policies.[11] During the preparations for the War in Iraq in 2003 the Pentagon held screenings of the film *The Battle of Algiers* alongside counterterrorism training.[12] Beauchamp highlights the subversions of gender norms to deceive within the film, stating, "Algerian women pass as French to deliver bombs into French civilian settings, while Algerian men attempt to pass as women in hijabs, their disguises undone when French soldiers spy their combat boots."[13] Through this, one can see how nation-states continuously repackage the moral geographies mentioned by McAlister to define a single nationalistic identity within the state contrasted with the "terrorist" other. This definition of who is included within the nationalistic majority of the state is then implemented into legislation, IDs, databases, and no-fly lists, disproportionately targeting gender nonconformance and individuals immigrating from the Middle East.[14, 15] When these moral geographies and binary representations are designed into these systems, they begin targeting communities, such as gender non-conforming people, immigrants, and ethnic, racial, or religious groups who do not conform to the conceptions of the one white, cisgender, and masculine nationalistic identity.[16]

The neoliberal marketization and commodification of sexualities and gender also significantly contribute to how particular LGBTQI+ and Middle Eastern identities are represented in media and, ultimately, algorithmic machines. David Harvey explains how neoliberalism took form in the 1970s, leading to the privatization of nearly every market within a nation, a result of deregulation and loosening of government interventions.[17] LGBTQI+ identity has been unable to escape the commodification and marketization that neoliberalism has brought into the contemporary era through the corporatization of queer identity by large firms in the form of "rainbow capitalism."[18] Rainbow capitalism combined with previously mentioned orientalist moral geographies creates what is deemed "pinkwashing" by Jasbir Puar.[19] "Pinkwashing" is a method utilized to paint foreign others as being anti-LGBTQI+ and unfriendly to such populations compared to the much more "accepting" state in order to distract from the occupation or oppression of an outsider group.[20] Puar uses the example of media representations and campaigns that elevate Tel Aviv as a gay-friendly city as a means for the Israeli state to obfuscate occupation and demonize Palestinians as being anti-LGBTQI+. These representations by the Israeli state render Tel Aviv and Israel as a "bastion" for LGBTQI+ rights in juxtaposition to Palestinian-controlled territory in Gaza in the West Bank as "backward" toward LGBTQI+ rights.[21] Such a nationalistic leveraging of queerness is facilitated by neoliberal capitalism in the commodification and defining of what and who gets to practice LGBTQI+ identity. Strategies of pinkwashing can be seen beyond the example of Israel-Palestine, including when evaluating U.S. counterterrorism efforts.[22] Its importance and prominence in supposedly LGBTQI+ friendly nation-states point to how it is implemented and created from the market commodification of divergent sexuality and gender norms to justify the oppression of Middle Eastern peoples and immigrants.

Unsurprisingly, such systems of representation and bias against LGBTQI+ and Middle Eastern communities are reproduced in the design and implementation of algorithms. In Cathy O'Neill's book, *Weapons of Math Destruction*, she discusses how human biases and flawed thinking get baked into algorithms and the machines they run on. Because "many of these models encoded human prejudice, misunderstanding, and bias into the software systems," the systematic normalization these products and systems "increasingly manage[s] our lives."[23] Using this knowledge that the math and function of these systems are inherently flawed, we can see how concepts of pinkwashing and moral geographies are encoded into these systems. In the latter half of her book, O'Neill mentions how the LGBTQI+ community has thus far been able to evade being harmed by such systems. This might be true for LGBTQI+ people who can conform to the nationalistic and patriarchal binaries. However, we come to see how these "weapons of math destruction" hurt those who do not conform to these nationalistic standards set forth by the state and neoliberal markets.

A clear example of these "weapons of math destruction" harming LGBTQI+, Middle Eastern, and immigrant communities is the use of airport body scanners and biometrics. Biometric surveillance technology is also exported to our daily lives as facial recognition algorithms, hurting marginalized people beyond the scope of the public sphere and into the private sphere. Toby Beauchamp describes how airport and airport biometric systems used as tools to counter terrorism actually rely on such instances of flawed human biases. In fact, "although they claim objective measurement of physical characteristics, biometrics programs cannot simply be extracted from the sociopolitical meanings attached to the bodies they assess, nor from the ways that those meanings shape biometrics research and development, data collection and interpretation, and screening procedures."[24] Since these systems cannot get rid of these human faults, LGBTQI+, Middle Eastern, and immigrant individuals are rigidly defined and harmed under them. Classifying those that do not fit into the neoliberal and nationalistic binary is determined by the biased data and flagged as terrorist or deceptive. Thus, it harmfully defines those identities even further

into the public consciousness.

"Surveillance Capitalism" shows how such dynamics operate in not only the public sphere but also the private sphere. Shoshana Zuboff coined "Surveillance Capitalism" as "the unilateral claiming of private human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data."[25] She discusses how the mass collection of individual data is utilized as a commodity to generate profits for large tech firms, thus severing interactions between the labor class and the owners of capital.[26] The mass collection of personal data is a dangerous avenue for large tech firms like Meta and Google. The firms have already developed facial recognition databases powered by artificial intelligence, databases that bad actors can weaponize.[27] The breakdown in interactions between CEOs of large tech firms and the working class will thus create decreased working-class representation in politics, leaving LGBTQI+, Middle Eastern, and immigrant communities with a limited voice in technological representation. The communities most harmed by these technologies and algorithms, which will undoubtedly be built with neoliberal pinkwashing and moral geographies, will have significantly limited means of contestation.[28] Limited means of contestation by marginalized communities will further rigidly classify identities into strict and conforming binaries determined by such machines.[29]

In conclusion, despite advancements in LGBTQI+ rights in Westernized liberal democracies, there still exists modes of thought that classify LGBTQI+, Middle Eastern, and immigrant peoples as being deceptive and dangerous to the neoliberal state or being against the nationalistic identity of the state. The public sees this classification and oppression of identities clearly through the moral geographies that were created through representations in media that are utilized in counterterrorism training,[30] along with the neoliberal marketization of LGBTQI+ identity. Marketization is implemented in the form of tourism campaigns that weaponize queer identity to distract from oppressive policy against an ethnic, racial, or religious population.[31] Such systems of thought and economics are then manifested through real-world policy, such as the Real ID Act or airport body scanners.[32] Since these thoughts and biases are ingrained, they are embedded into the algorithms we create, which work to rigidly classify identities even further and define them as representations in the collective consciousness. The advent of surveillance capitalism and facial recognition technology will further exacerbate such strict identities in the collective consciousness. The increased implementation of such technology makes the situation even more tenuous for marginalized communities, limiting their voices to protest these systems directly to owners of capital and large tech firms.

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Unprincipled Peaceniks

Scott Ludwig

Empowering the Private Sector in the Face of 21st Century Horrors

Abstract

This paper investigates internet traffic volume between Russian state propaganda outlets and prominent left- and right-wing media outlets that openly oppose US military aid for Ukraine. Combating disinformation is critical to the health of democracies that enjoy widespread internet access. Efforts to preserve the information space should identify the avenues and likely targets of disinformation. This analysis indicates that online communities focused on alternative finance are an overlooked target audience for Russian State propaganda narratives.

Introduction

A popular YouTube video titled "KGB defector Yuri Bezmenov's warning to America" has more than a million views and shows a 1984 interview with Yuri Bezmenov, who recounts the KGB's purported plan to overthrow the American government via psychological warfare. Bezmenov's list of schemes would fill out a McCarthyism bingo card; Marxist professors indoctrinating impressionable students with criticisms of capitalism and imperialism to undermine their patriotic loyalty and produce a population too demoralized by self-doubt to resist communist expansion.[1] It's not clear how much of his own story Bezmenov believed or how much he just said what American and

Canadian Anticommunists wanted to hear, but his description fit a long running narrative of foreign influence over left-wing political groups.[2]

Since the Cold War ended and communism's relevance faded, Russian ideology and influence have evolved to target new audiences. Since February 2022, most Americans supported Ukraine's right to defense, yet some have been protesting America's support rather than Russia's invasion. On February 15, 2023, the American Libertarian Party and People's Party cooperated to host Ron Paul, Tulsi Gabbard, Jimmy Dore, and more from the left and right political fringes at the rally to "Rage Against the War Machine."[3] Throughout the recording, a protestor's jaunty Russian flag waves in the background, and some speakers repeated startlingly pro-Russian talking points, blaming the invasion on alleged Ukrainian Nazism, CIA coups, and NATO enlargement over Russia's flagrant violation of Ukrainian sovereignty.[4] Throughout the subsequent year, Congress battled over crucial aid to resupply Ukraine's dwindling reserves. The party-line vote on December 6, 2023 failed due to unanimous rejection by Republicans rather than leftists.[5]

While sincere anti-war sentiment and activism may still feature in criticism of the US, this paper will present evidence that modern Russian influence casts a broader net and finds a wider audience among various brands of conservative isolationism. These libertarians, populists, ethnonationalists, and others congregate in digital spaces that amplify conspiratorial American narratives while sprinkling in Kremlin-approved propaganda. This investigation uses data from the traffic analysis website *Similarweb.com* to reveal numerous online information channels between Russian state propaganda (RSP) and fringe social media, blogs, and news aggregators.[6] The microdata indicates that these propaganda intermediaries launder Russian talking points through domestic authors, the most prominent of which associate prominently with the broader anti-war movement for more vital credibility.

Methodology

Inspired by the 2016 investigation of YouTube radicalization, *The PewdiePipeline,*[7] this paper hypothesized that general peace activism websites, such as *CodePink* and *Antiwar.com*, would link to an intermediary layer of websites that host Russian narratives and would then funnel the audience to outright RSP. *Similarweb* uses macrodata to rank websites by the volume of incoming and outgoing traffic to one another.[8] This analysis used forward and backward passes, treating *codepink.org, pslweb.org, thegrayzone.com, peoplesparty.org, lp.org,* and *antiwar.com* webpages as entry-points[9] and treating Russian state-affiliated[10] media outlets *rt.com, sputnikglobe.com,* and *tass.com* as endpoint sources. The analysis identifies the top sources and destinations of traffic as listed by *Similarweb.com*'s top 100 incoming and outgoing traffic lists, highlighting by qualitative observation those that presented RSP narratives in English without context or criticism. Primary Russian narratives for this analysis include Ukrainian moral and political corruption, equating aid to Ukraine with escalation, alleged Ukrainian war crimes, and inevitable Russian strategic victory.[11]

Limitations

Similarweb's "starter-monthly" plan only provides the top one hundred incoming and outgoing websites, and only for the past three months. This investigation only covers a limited time span from September 23 to November 23 of 2023. As such, conclusions only apply to the state of Russian engagement with antiwar narratives near the end of the war's second year. It may not accurately reflect Russian influence strategy at the conflict's outbreak. Finally, the analysis excludes Spanish language amplifiers and cannot reflect trends among a sizable portion of American readership from this investigation.[12]

Results

The online traffic flow did not form a clear pipeline as hypothesized, but rather a dense information bubble of sites amplifying intermingled American isolationist narratives

with Russian ones. The back-to-front pass through *Similarweb* revealed amplifiers falling into four main categories of subject material: alternative news aggregators, conspiracy theories, alternative finance bloggers, and social forums.

Back to Front: Starting at the Source

News Aggregators

Russian State Propaganda, designated as disinformation, attracts conspiratorial readers distrustful of establishment journalism. These readers flock to news aggregators like *Citizen Free Press, Drudge Report, What Does It Mean*, and *UNZ Review* to receive what these sites advertise as an unfiltered array of sources.

Website	Total traffic directed to RSP	Total traffic	US rank
Whatdoesit-mean.com	150k	535k	#86,573
Citizen Free Press	139k	22.27M	#879
The Drudge Report	50k	134.2M	#175
Dissentwatch.com	30.3k	31k	#702,746
Revolver.news	22.8k	5.670M	#10,756
UNZ.com	14.6k	6.154M	#13,393
Censored.news	10.3k	603k	#88,838

While many of these amplifiers do not produce their pro-Russian content, they present all citation hyperlinks as equally credible, with official RSP sources presented on equal footing with established outlets like *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. Some curate more than others; *The Drudge Report* presents many pro- and anti-Ukrainian narratives, whereas *UNZ* and *Citizen Free Press* rely heavily on RSP hyperlinks to fill out their foreign affairs sections.

Conspiracy Theorists

The infamous outlet *Infowars* typifies this category full of antisemitism, 9/11 truther theory, QAnon splinters, and other such bastions of radical conspiracy theory.[13]

Website	Total Traffic directed to RSP	Total traffic	US rank
Rense.com	984.1k	2.386M	#26,015
Infowars.com	42k	19.27M	#3,628
Whatreally-happened.com	21.3k	965k	#83,097

Alex Jones, disgraced head of *Infowars.com* best known for spreading outrageous disinformation,[14] is the most notorious in this category, but his contemporary, Jeff Rense of *rense.com*, directs an astonishingly greater volume of traffic from his website to RSP compared with most other amplifiers. Kremlin rhetoric appears deeply resonant with the most extreme forms of American ethnonationalism, where the conflict in Ukraine is presented as a satanic war[15] against Christianity using biolabs created by a Jewish conspiracy to destroy Russia.[16] *Similarweb* data shows these ethnonationalism amplifiers liberally link out to other amplifier categories, but primarily receive traffic from the most extreme fringe media sites, like *UNZ Review* and *Zerohedge*. However, the conservative video platform *Rumble.com* also ranks second on Rense's list.[17] Otherwise, most of its traffic comes from other extreme ethnonationalist or religious groups like *raptureready.com* and *truthseekernews.com*.[18]

Alternative Finance Bloggers

Rather than presenting RSP in a vacuum like the aggregators, many bloggers launder RSP through citation in their original persuasive writing.

Website	Total Traffic directed to RSP	Total traffic	US rank
Voxday.net	109.6k	7.103M	#25,558
Zerohedge	88k	85.74M	#917
Nakedcapital-ism.com	40.5k	1.880M	#33,840
Paulcraigrob-erts.com	36k	418k	#90,033

The bloggers vary somewhat in content; self-proclaimed misogynist and racist[19] Robert Beale (Vox Day) prefers a traditionalist culture war narrative. Paul Craig Roberts uses his Department of Commerce experience to discuss policy, and Susan Webber of Naked Capitalism leans leftward in her economic commentary. All share an affinity for financial analysis skeptical of America's too-big-to-fail banking establishment, as well as for Russian hyperlinks when discussing international affairs. Through their lens, the Ukraine War is not a justified defense of international stability and sovereignty but merely the next phase of the "Forever War," another bargain struck between shady men in smoke-filled rooms to enrich themselves at the taxpayer's expense.[20, 21, 22]

Social Forums

While Twitter and Meta's subsidiaries have sworn off major RSP outlets, other social spaces fill that void for contrarian readers.

Website	Total Traffic directed to RSP	Total traffic	US rank
Moonofala-bama.org	55.5k	7.393M	#23,546
Gab.com	38k	22.75M	#2,593
Rumble.com	8.8k	128.2M	#148

Gab and Rumble (politically conservative versions of Facebook and YouTube, respectively) both host prominent *RT* channels, with 110k[23] and 60k[24] followers regularly viewing unvarnished Kremlin disinformation. Gab and Rumble's community posts about Ukraine lean toward open Russophilia, typically avoided on other sites. Whereas the news blogs above and the users of isolationist blog *moonofalabama.org* prefer a more detached tone when discussing how the war affects the U.S., the Gab and Rumble communities often openly celebrate narratives of Russian heroism and Ukrainian defeat.

Front to Back: From the Entry Points

Treating the peace movement as an entry point to RSP provides sparse evidence for a peace-to-propaganda pipeline. Code Pink, World Beyond War, and PSL may organize prominent antiwar events, but they lack traffic links to either core RSP or RSP amplifiers and show little online presence in general. The People's Party, notable for its presidential spoiler aspirations and the partnership to organize Rage Against the War Machine, did not even break 5,000 visits, the threshold at which *Similarweb* considers traffic significant enough to be worth recording in detail. *Antiwar.com* and *The Grayzone* do maintain high volumes of redirections from the libertarian and right-wing populist amplifiers, but the traffic is largely unidirectional. For example, prolific amplifier Zerohedge is the fourth- and fifth-ranked traffic driver to these sites, yet only appears on *Antiwar.com*'s outgoing list at number 67. Ce*nsored.news, moonofalabama.org, citizenfreepress.com, rense.com* and *nakedcapitalism.com* appear in these websites' top 10 incoming lists with no reciprocal outgoing traffic. This implies that RSP amplifiers view pacifist online spaces as instruments to bolster by directing attention rather than entry points into the RSP info space.

Antiwar.com also illuminates another limitation of relying on traffic analytics when it openly lists *Pravda.ru* and the Russian Information Agency among its reporting sources.[25] Neither of these sites appears in *Similarweb's* traffic volume data, but this qualitatively demonstrates an open willingness to launder RSP through citations of less prominent disinformation websites.[26]

Discussion

Regardless of whether the balance was more even at the outset of the War in Ukraine, online traffic shows little evidence of interaction between the left and right wings of the coalition. In digital spaces, only libertarian and national populist domains appear connected to the disinformation pipeline. These domains often direct users to RSP and to anti-war websites, but rarely receive traffic from the anti-war domains. Therefore, online anti-war engagement should be viewed more as one spoke of a larger disinformation hub rather than a linear

progression from the entry point to the RSP core.

Among the four categories of amplifiers, candidates for the status of disinformation hub are better measured by breadth of interaction than depth. *Rense.com* may outclass its compatriots in sheer volume delivered to RSP, but its unsavory ultranationalism locks it out of less extreme digital spaces, and it does not appear on any other of the observed amplifiers' top 100 outgoing lists. By contrast, three websites stand out for extraordinarily broad link presence: *Zerohedge, Rumble*, and various *Substack*[27] blogs in aggregate appear on twice more incoming and outgoing top 100 lists than the next most connected domain.

Rumble's broad appeal to various flavors of conservatism suits its hub status but does not illuminate new conclusions, whereas *Zerohedge's* more curated libertarian content highlights an interesting trend of websites two layers removed from RSP: alternative finance. The *Zerohedge* front page displays a directory with a couple dozen partnering links, most of which peddle cryptocurrencies, precious metals, and other such financial alternatives preferred by those who hope to circumvent or even supplant traditional financial institutions. *321gold.com* is the only example of these to appear on an RSP site's top 100 incoming, but it lands at number 20 on *Zerohedge's* top incoming list and can be found on those of seven other amplifiers.[28] *Dollarcollapse.com, schiffgold.com, goldmoney.com, siliconinvestor.com*, and other flavors of investment advice to beat the system mingle at the periphery of the amplifiers,[29] and the bloggers' shared interest in finance reveals a pipeline may be running perpendicular to the antiwar movement, one funneling Americans to RSP from an entry point of frustration at an opaque and inequitable financial system which bars entry and makes its own rules. The military-industrial complex personifies that frustration in the public's mind, so Ukraine falls squarely in the collateral damage of that resentment.

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Social Media and the Digitization of Political Martyrdom

Desiree Winns

The horrific murder of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini by Iranian morality police resulted in a surge of protests within the country and around the world. Her face, that of a young, intelligent woman who suffered her last moments at the hands of a brutal and repressive regime, circulated across social media as Iranian women posted their cut hair and committed to the call, "Women, Life, Freedom." The hashtag #mahsaamini was "tweeted and retweeted more than 250 million times in Persian and more than 50 million times in English in the first month after her death."[1] In an era where news can be shared with millions within seconds, social media provides a platform for individuals denied justice in life to become figures of retribution and resistance in death. Digital martyrdom allows anyone to become a public persona, easily reposted, reshared, and recognized by their face and the meaning of their unjustified end. How does the expanded definition of martyrdom in the digital age activate modern political movements?

1. *Digital Martyrdom Depicts Death as a Symptom of Injustice*

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, *martyrdom* is "the suffering of death on account of adherence to a cause and especially to one's religious faith."[2] Martyrdom implies that the individual has committed to self-sacrifice for a greater purpose. However, not every person whose name becomes a hashtag for their wrongful death chose to devote themselves to a cause. When such an individual's death becomes symbolized by a hashtag or social media campaign, the resultant martyrdom emphasizes the social or political issues that caused their death. For example, the death of a peaceful protester exposes an ineffective protection of free speech, and the death of an unarmed civilian exposes unchecked police brutality. In Amini's case, the death of a woman who was 'improperly' wearing her hijab exposed the overbearing control of a misogynistic regime. Digital martyrdom is built from the unchecked issues that require justice or reform, with the faces and names of those killed serving as relatable markers of the movement.

The transformation of an innocent individual's murder into an act of martyrdom provides an opportunity for their death to become motivation for online political movements. In situations where justice is not granted, resistance is directed towards the system that permitted their death as a result of neglect or direct order. Digital martyrdom can still occur if the individual was not directly killed but driven to death by unjust socioeconomic or political circumstances. The Arab Spring, a series of revolutions supported by social media, was initiated by the self-immolation of fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi

in Tunisia. Bouazizi's cousin filmed protestors gathering in front of the government building where he set himself on fire, and published the video on Facebook, where "the video was… widely shared."[3] While the role of social media in the mobilization of the Arab Spring has been disputed as "just one channel of social and political networking among many others," what remains evident is that the collective response to the death of Bouazizi was assisted by social media.[3]

2. *An Individual's Political Afterlife is Controlled by Digital Martyrdom*

Digital martyrdom is one avenue for a group to reclaim the story and imagery surrounding a deceased individual. The discussion of the life, personality, and impact of the deceased individual also contributes significantly to their political afterlife. The awareness that anyone could become such a martyr influences ongoing digital activism. #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, a social media campaign that began after the shooting of Mike Brown in 2014, referred specifically to the unflattering photos selected by the media to represent unarmed African Americans shot by police.[4] The criminalized portrayal of Mike Brown by American media, justifying his violent death as a response to a violent life, motivated digital participation from the public. Black Americans posted opposing images of themselves, one more positive and the other with potentially negative connotations, posing the question of which photo would be circulated should they be killed by police.[5] This hypothetical questioning of one's own murder and the world's reaction to it has been applied to other movements, such as #AmINext, devoted to demanding justice for murdered and missing indigenous women in Canada.[6]

Popular campaigns in America can spread to other nations and be modified according to context. The death of Mahsa Amini was described by British-Iranian actor Omid Djalili as "Iran's George Floyd moment."[7] This paper defines a "George Floyd moment" as any social movement where the death of one person mobilizes millions to act in their name, so they would not have died in vain. Such moments can be seen as opposition to the media's unfair portrayal of the life and legacy of the deceased person, which often places blame solely on the victim in favor of the perpetrator.

The self-immolation of U.S. airman Aaron Bushnell in front of the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC represents such a moment where a person's political afterlife can affect opposing sides. While pro-Palestine activists claim Bushnell as a literal martyr who gave his life to a cause and as a symbol of resistance, organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League describe him as an anarchist backed by extremist and antisemitic groups who express "support for terrorism against Israel."[8] Depending on who interprets them, Bushnell's actions and last words, "Free Palestine," are utilized to uplift him as a hero or discredit him across social media.[9]

3. *Digital Martyrdom Creates Legacy to Prevent Further Injustice*

In cases where the individual was already active in politics, there persists a search for justice and a call to continue that person's work. The 2018 murder and dismemberment of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi aroused international attention to the dangers faced by writers from Saudi Arabia. The call for Saudi Arabia to be held accountable for the murder, represented online by #JusticeforJamal, exists not only to commemorate and demand justice for Khashoggi but to also alert the international community of the consequences of refusing action.[10] On October 2, 2023, the fifth anniversary of his murder, PEN (Poets, Essayists, Novelists) America issued a press release stating that "governments and institutions should reject business as usual with bin Salman's governmen— otherwise, targeting writers could become the new normal."[11] In this way, digital martyrdom kept the collective memory of Jamal Khashoggi alive, providing a platform for advocates to continue the work and legacy of a man wrongfully killed and denied justice afterward.

Digital martyrdom can be used to demand justice

for one particular person, as well as to prevent similar situations and tragedies. Common rhetoric around digital martyrs invokes ideas that their death was not in vain or that they will "rest in power."[12] The Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, dedicated to the memories of multiple unarmed African Americans killed by police, performs in this manner. One popular hashtag, #ICantBreathe, was a specific reference to the last words of Eric Garner, who died after being held in a chokehold by a police officer in 2014.[13] As this became a chant at protests and later modified to "We Can't Breathe," the sentiment was not "just about empathizing with Garner's dying moment but about mobilizing that moment into social action."[14]

4. *Digital Martyrdom Ensures Online Immortality and Empathy for Multiple People*

Thanks to modern technology, videos and images of the deceased can be reposted and shared wherever there is access to the Internet. One way to ensure the immortality of someone unjustly killed is to post their face and story online for current and future generations. The digital application of political martyrdom does not have to be limited to one person or a single movement. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), as of April 2024, at least 80 journalists have been killed in Gaza.[15] The names, stories, and faces of these journalists have been circulated online and across social media by Al-Jazeera and CPJ, which, as of April 2024, have 9.2 million[16] and 34,500 [17] Instagram followers, respectively. This guarantees impact beyond the region, especially as Internet access becomes more restricted for residents in Gaza. Social media has become a primary tool for Gazans and Israelis battling the "information war" after the Hamas terrorist attack on October 7, 2023.[18] Unfiltered first-person perspectives from the Gaza Strip can be vital for international audiences, as "Egypt and Israel control entry into the Gaza Strip… [and] the battlefield inside Gaza is mostly off-limits to major international news organizations."[18] Social media allows people unaffiliated with larger media networks to continuously speak on and expose ongoing events, effectively democratizing the information space for individuals and news stories that otherwise may be ignored.

This democratization of the digital space, in addition to the permanence of the Internet, allows a person's image and story to remain visible long after their death. A digital immortality of individuals who died under unjust circumstances creates continuous empathy, especially as similar deaths occur. The names of those who died under similar circumstances represent a collective problem that encourages empathy and power through the remembrance of individuals. The #SayTheirNames movement, uplifting African American victims of police brutality, is a prominent example of the power of collecting and remembering names.[19] Another commonly used example is the "'We are all' trope," which "emerges whenever sympathy is needed for victims of some tragedy: 'We are all Hokies' after the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, 'We are all Bostonians' after the Boston Marathon bombing, and so on."[14] By turning the tragedy of a few into that of many, political activism relies on empathy to share the pain of a loss and transform it into collective power.

5. *Digital Martyrdom and High-Risk Activism*

Social media is often criticized for "performative activism," a form of social participation that encourages accomplishment through simply liking or sharing a post on a political issue, while no real work is done to rectify it.[20] Malcolm Gladwell asserts that high-risk activism, such as boycotts and nonviolent confrontations, are more effective in changing the status quo. According to Gladwell, this high-risk activism is fostered by "strong ties" between friends or members of a racial group. He describes Internet activism as a "weak tie," further compromised by distance or distraction, stating that "weak ties seldom lead to high-risk activism."[21] However, social media still serves an active role in mobilizing younger generations to action. Social media expands public awareness of political topics, bringing news and background information to the forefront of attention for new audiences. According to Pew Research Center, a "median of 77% across…19 countries surveyed

say social media is an effective way to raise public awareness about sociopolitical issues [while] many also consider social media effective for changing people's minds on social or political issues (65% median)."[22]

Conclusion

Digital martyrdom has become an effective strategy for turning tragedy into action. Regaining control of one person's story and the depiction of their life, as well as their last moments, bolsters online political movements by securing a permanent motive. While this motive can be dependent upon the intentions of the movement, a person's online political afterlife brings a centralized and individualized focus to wider issues. Digital martyrdom encourages empathy by elevating the faces of those who could easily be our sisters, friends, fathers or our own. Through effective outrage towards injustices endured by everyday people, digital martyrdom unites communities and strengthens political movements.

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Technologies that alter the playing field! How state authorities could use contemporary technologies for political gain

Pedro Huet

The Mexican Case

Abstract

Adopting new technologies has been debated in political philosophy for centuries. To further the literature about digital technologies, this text makes a case study of the AMLO Administration's use of social media and public media tools to disseminate its messages among large sectors of the Mexican population. The study finds evidence of the Mexican Government using digital technologies to misinform the population, boosting the incumbent government's electoral campaigns, and using digital spaces to publicly attack critics in front of a large audience, all contributing to democratic erosion. The text concludes that the main issue could lie in Mexico's historical inexperience with democracy, leading many to undervalue this system. A long-term solution could be a campaign to educate the population regarding the value of democracy, while a short-term solution could be limiting public authorities from using digital technologies for purposes other than explicitly stating their actions.

Introduction

The consequences of the adoption of new technologies have, historically, generated a healthy political debate. Some political philosophers have argued that adopting new technologies will benefit communities and individuals by maximizing human capacities and allowing large groups to coordinate and fulfill daunting tasks.[1] On the other hand, some have argued that the adoption of these instruments and tools is the root cause of our societies' most pressing problems: generated inequality by concentrating these technologies in the hands of a few, using them to further extract from the dispossessed and trap communities in such perpetual cycles.[2]

One of the branches of this debate has concentrated on studying the effects of technology on democratization: how do technologies, development, and modernization impact the political institutions of countries?[3] While advancements like motor vehicles, electricity, and highways have undoubtedly shaped democracy, contemporary digital technologies also garner particular attention for their impact on political institutions and the population's adoption of democratic values.[4] This question holds global significance, as the literature has found that a democratic form of government is highly linked to redistribution and development,[5] as well as a more inclusive society and harmonious relations among its members.[6]

Mexico is an insightful case study for this topic. The country has a unique history among Latin American countries as the only one that didn't suffer a military dictatorship during the 20th century, and is a relatively young democracy and middle-income country,[7] all of which make it a fascinating case to observe how digital technologies can affect the perception of its population towards democratic institutions and democratic governance. For these reasons, this piece analyzes how the López Obrador administration's use of digital technologies via his "Daily Press Conferences" can be interpreted as a strategy that the President is using to consolidate power, with the side effect of eroding the country's democratic institutions. It also

offers a proposal to mitigate the negative impacts of these technologies and what regulations could be implemented to prevent officials from exploiting these for political gain.

Background

The López Obrador Administration (2018-2024) came into power in 2018 when the Nationalist Andres Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and the political party he founded, *Movimiento Regeneración Nacional* (MORENA), won the 2018 Mexican General Elections with a landslide victory of more than 53% of the vote share.[8] Prior to this victory, he had lost twice in narrow races when running for office (2006 and 2012); on both occasions, accusing the winners of committing electoral fraud and argued that the country's autonomous electoral body, currently the *Instituto Nacional Electoral* (INE), was corrupt.[9] To this day, MORENA retains a majority of over 50% in both Legislative Chambers, which has allowed AMLO to enact reforms with little friction.

Digital Technologies to Manipulate Information: Daily Press Conferences.

In the last five years, Mexico has seen increased digital disinformation. Although this practice presents itself on different occasions and through multiple sources,[10] the Federal Government has been the most constant and prominent source of this phenomenon.[11] Every weekday, the President, accompanied by different appointed members of his government and occasional guests, heads a Daily Press Conference (*Conferencia de Prensa Matutina*),[12] broadcast live at the National Government Palace. President López Obrador welcomes journalists from different news outlets and platforms, and lasts, on average, between two and a half to three hours. It usually involves a portion in which government officials and guests give information about matters they supervise, while there is a longer portion in which the President directly answers questions from the attending journalists. Its existence has been justified to "inform the people" of his government's actions.[13] The press conference is broadcast live on the Mexican Government's official website, its YouTube channel, and by some state-level public media sources.[14] Although giving constant public press conferences might seem harmless, even admirable, to maintain public accountability and transparency, the evidence indicates political motives are really at play.

First, these press conferences have been accused of distorting information and confusing the population. Many independent news outlets extensively found that the information given at these conferences is misleading at best and disingenuous at worst. According to a 2019 to 2022 study performed by the consulting firm Spin-Taller, public officials made a daily average of 103 comments/statements/etc. that can be referred to as lies or half-truths during these conferences.[15] Hence, information the Head of State himself and a myriad of other members of his government present to the population ranges from faulty to outright false[16] (i.e., grossly exaggerating the positive results of their actions, ignoring or downplaying its faults as well as outright making up evidence of progress and denying uncomfortable official figures and data).

These trends ultimately weaken democratic and government accountability. If a country's authorities can repeatedly present false information as reality and use digital technologies, like the internet and social media, to spread it widely among the population, inhabitants will hardly be able to make an accurate judgment of the government's performance and responsiveness to their needs.[17] Historically, this technique is considered a strategy to weaken a polity's capacity for collective action. If a government can disguise practically any of its actions as implementing the population's preferences, then there is nothing stopping authorities from using office to implement their own will and claiming its actions are for the people, effectively acting as tyrants.[18]

Additionally, the Administration's daily press conferences erode democracy by allowing the incumbent government to perform unfair and unlawful political campaigning. The use of these broadcasts for political campaigning is widely

documented. Mexico's electoral regulations state that political parties and elected authorities may not campaign outside of electoral periods.[19] Yet, when answering questions and making comments, López Obrador constantly and explicitly criticizes previous administrations and his political opponents while also praising his political allies,[20] and even claiming that he and his political party are "slaves" to the people.[21] The Head of State and his party have been accused and sanctioned on multiple occasions for doing this on the grounds of breaking the country's electoral law, yet the sanctions have simply amounted to fines and haven't changed his behavior.[22] This effectively gives the President's political movement an additional space to campaign, which is propelled and spread massively via the Federal Government's online influence.[23] Such tools are unavailable to other political actors[24] and bypasses the country's electoral laws.[25] When an incumbent has an unlawful advantage over the opposition, it violates some of the basic principles of democracy, including fair competition and equal access to compete for power,[26] which, according to Schedler and other scholars on the nature and basic components of democracy, likens administrations to regimes of an authoritarian nature.[27]

Finally, the Mexican Government uses digital technologies to pursue and attack its critics and autonomous government bodies. It became apparent during AMLO's press conferences that he used personal attacks towards organizations or individuals who criticized him.[28] Most of López Obrador's critics have been journalists and autonomous government bodies that oppose his actions, mainly accusing him of weakening the separation of powers and abusing executive power.[29] As a result, the President has become famous for shaming, insulting, and slandering his critics, to the point of creating a weekly segment in his press conferences dedicated to "exposing the liars" about his administration.[30] He is known to accuse these bodies of being "corrupt" and calling for their "functions [to] be absorbed" by the executive departments.[31] AMLO's actions can be interpreted as an attempt to erode the separation of powers.

The weakening of democracy is clear in the case of the President's treatment of the independent government, as he is publicly spreading his attacks via his large digital infrastructure to reduce the public support of these. After using these press conferences to criticize and discredit independent institutions, he follows through with action by working to defund them or eliminate them altogether.[32] In this manner, this Presidency is concentrating power at the expense of other government bodies, which could be a great risk to guaranteeing the separation of powers. This basic structure is the foundation of contemporary democratic governments.[33]

The weakening of democracy is also apparent with the direct attacks on journalists, as this strategy is peculiar and differs from other state briefings. That President López Obrador has the flexibility to tailor his conferences to attack journalists by name on live broadcasts likens these broadcasts more to tools to foster a cult of personality than initiatives to spread transparency. In fact, in one incident, he publicly called a well-respected reporter "mercenary" and publicly displayed that individual's finances during a press conference.[34] By attacking media outlets and individual journalists in a widely viewed and easy-to-access platform, AMLO seems to be weaponizing his digital presence to discredit and minimize the importance of independent civil organizations who seek to inform the population of their representative's actions. Historically, autonomous organizations that work towards accountability have been considered key components of any society that hopes to have authorities responsive to its citizens' needs,[35] as well as a pillar to any nation seeking to maintain democratic institutions.[36]

Critical Analysis: What To Do?

It is important to ask: why is the case of Mexico different from many other countries in public authorities' use of digital technology and why is this eroding its democracy? One possibility is that, since Mexico experienced a relatively recent democratic transition (less than twenty-five years ago), and its political system has

had an unstable party system (shifting from a multiparty system to a dominant party system), the electorate could still be developing strategies to gather reliable information about the performance of the different parties.[37] Extensive studies have shown that even voters from democracies with well-established parties can have difficulties explaining or justifying their political views and preferences,[38] so there is good reason to believe that the voters in a society with so many changes in the political system in such a relatively short amount of time could still be gathering information on how to approach the shifting political scenarios.

On the contrary, behavioral studies have shown that years of human evolution have made individuals susceptible to using "shortcuts" to make decisions when faced with high stakes matters in which there is an overload of information.[39] Since electing a national representative is an imperative process in which dueling campaigns spread conflicting narratives, the healthy functioning of representative democracy depends on voters having easy access to useful information to guide them at the time of casting their preferences.[40] Elected authorities and candidates can manipulate facts and spread misinformation, exacerbating partisanship and creating misjudgments or false criticisms of other political actors; doing so ultimately makes it hard for voters to know which sources of information to trust. This lack of unbiased communication may be motivating portions of the population to guide their vote using these shortcuts:[41] support the candidates that seems to be most present and most warm to them.[42] In this situation, AMLO's constant presence and praising of 'the people' in all his conferences[43] could be enough to gain the trust of many viewers, despite many of his adverse attitudes toward democracy.

A long-term solution could be public policies, such as awareness campaigns or school programs, focused on informing the population about basic democratic principles (separation of powers, transparency, political institutions, free press, and so forth). Since there is evidence that information and awareness campaigns can affect citizen behavior on political subjects,[44] in time, a better-informed population on these topics could be expected to be more resistant to using media or digital environments to weaken democratic institutions. As for the short term, allowing state authorities to only use digital technologies if they follow some very specific criteria could offer some benefits. Specifically, Mexican autonomous electoral authorities could allow politicians and officials to use media (i.e. conferences, shows, or recordings) to share information about their actions, policies, and results only if they don't contain any claims favoring a political entity. In other words, they could express their actions, the rational behind them and their impact without adding any normative claims (i.e. stating that their policies are the "right choices") or comparing themselves to other political actors (i.e. complain about previous government actions or decisions).

This strategy seems, at the very least, viable. A common counterargument to limiting the communication of elected authorities in the literature of democracy is that this approach would make candidates more difficult to reach by the public and civil society, which would be counterproductive to democracy as it would hinder the people's capacity to communicate their preferences and keep their authorities accountable.[45] The main advantage is that this approach doesn't remove authorities' ability to communicate their actions to the public or answer their questions; they could make as many broadcasts and answer as many questions as they liked, but they would have to avoid making judgements or comparisons. This would allow citizens to still have access to relevant information to form their opinions on their authorities' performance: digital technologies could facilitate the communication of what actions have been taken, the rationale behind these and their current or expected success. The approach could be used to communicate a wide variety of public actions and proposals, even if these were subjects involving the use of funds, like redistribution or welfare policies. The plain fact is that, if politicians were unable to voice judgements on the adequacy of their decisions or make comparisons to other actors, the outcome

would be that their actions and successes would speak for themselves, without partisanship nor demagoguery to threaten the country's democratic institutions.

In conclusion, it is reasonable to question whether the AMLO regime's use of digital technologies could have eroded the country's democratization process. Be it through spreading misinformation, bolstering the President and MORENA's political influence via unlawfully campaigning through these platforms, or by weaponizing their online capacities to attack the opposition, political theory indicates Mexico's national authorities are symptomatic of using new digital tools and environments to weaken democratic institutions, ultimately weakening the Constitution's system of separation of powers (described in article 49).[46] Although this text analyzed the possible effects of the Mexican Government's use of digital technologies, there is much more to cover in the same context. Future studies could analyze if other political actors, like opposition parties or even non-political figures, have any chance of using media and digital environments to champion the popular will of the people or also use them to hinder the nation's perception of democracy.

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The Power Behind El Pueblo Libre de Cuba

Elaine Melgarejo

Abstract

The Cuban American exiled community in South Florida is often referred to as *el pueblo libre de Cuba*, the free people of Cuba. South Florida holds the second largest Cuban population in the world, following the island of Cuba itself, located 90 miles south of Key West, Florida. In the past 60 years, Cuban Americans have established a reactionary enclave community following the Cuban Revolution. This community has also produced one of the Republican Party's most loyal and influential voters.

I analyze how Cuban Americans differ from other Hispanic communities with their voting preferences and support for discriminating legislation that threatens the social, economic, and educational advancements of migrants in Florida. I find that the relationship between Spanish language media and the collective memory of the Cuban Revolution in South Florida is most influential for the Cuban American voting pattern. Spanish-speaking migrants are reliant on the limited Spanish media in the United States, and therefore, Spanish language media became the host for Cuban democratization. Without credible opposition in the Spanish language media space, current broadcasts have control of Cuban consciousness and the political landscape in one of the most influential electoral states.

Introduction

Many Cuban Americans praise the United States as a land free of communism. In the current polarized political climate, the Republican Party enjoys loyalty from a large percentage of Cuban Americans. In 2020, 56% of Cuban voters in Florida voted in support of Donald Trump.[1] Political strategists find success when Republican politicians relate the Democratic Party to socialism and broadcast these conversations on Spanish language media where listeners carry trauma from fleeing communist countries.[2] The rise of Donald Trump's popularity in South Florida, along with that of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, is encouraging Cuban Americans to denounce racial equity and social justice work, and mask discriminatory acts as protection of their communities against Marxist theory.[3] To analyze how the Cuban American vote differs from other Hispanic groups, South Florida politics must be understood in consonance with the collective history of the Cuban Revolution, the transnational identity of Cuban Americans, and their exile media.

The Cuban American Identity

To understand the reaction Cuban Americans have towards the mentioning of socialist or communist ideologies and policies, it is essential to understand the history behind the Cuban American identity. Between the end of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and 2015, more than 1.3 million Cubans left the island.[4] The Cuban émigrés are distinct from some other Hispanic migrant groups in the United States because they consider themselves exiles and political refugees from a communist state, not solely immigrants. During the first exodus following the Cuban Revolution, the majority of émigrés were from the educated middle-class in Cuba, which flourished under the former presidency of Fulgencio Batista from 1933 to 1944, and his dictatorship from 1952 to 1959. After overthrowing Batista's demoralized and corrupt government, Fidel Castro promoted political liberties for the working class. Soon after, the educated middle class and elite class were threatened by Castro's nationalization of industries and expropriation of agricultural estates.[5] Their exile was motivated by seized property, persecution, imprisonment, and torture under Castro's government.[6]

Despite a traumatic departure from Cuba, the early émigrés brought with them significant

cultural capital for upward mobility in South Florida. As political refugees fleeing communism amidst the height of the Cold War, they were also an asset to the American government. President Eisenhower established the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center to provide relief with refugee support, such as access to work permits, English language classes, small loans, and housing assistance.[7] By the 1970s, Cuban émigrés were seeking naturalization and influencing favorable US-Cuban affairs by participating within the American political system 90 miles away from the island.[8]

In 1980, a new exodus known as the Mariel Boatlift disembarked, bringing nearly 114,000 Cubans to Florida's shores. Compared to 3% of previous émigrés, 40% of the *Marielitos* were Afro-Cuban, and most were poor and uneducated.[9] The arrival of the *Marielitos* brought the arrival of Cubans who were socialized in revolutionary Cuba and grew tired of its obligatory politics. Although they were more likely to maintain close relationships with those remaining in Cuba, they were eager to begin a life unconstrained by Castro's government.[10]

The Collective Memory of the Cuban Revolution

The Cuban diaspora in South Florida has flourished for over sixty years, shaping both the Cuban American identity and history. The remembrance of the Cuban Revolution and continued failure to overthrow the communist state elicits somber and reactionary sentiments among the community. Discussions of the Cuban Revolution often portray a collective memory formed by émigrés in South Florida rather than an objective history.[11] Collective memory contests, negotiates, and reshapes history as people attempt to understand their modern-day identity in relation to their nation's past. Contention over collective history therefore threatens the construct of a sensitive national identity associated with it.[12] Inconvenient facts are left out of historical discussions, such as how the United States' influence in pre-revolutionary Cuba can explain Castro's rise and consolidation of power, or how early émigrés benefited from Batista's dictatorship. The historical amnesia and trauma of the early émigrés built the hyper-polarized foundation of South Florida's politics, focused on associating unfavorable policies as part of extremist political agendas.[13]

The foundation of this polarized political climate is unique in comparison to polarized politics elsewhere in the U.S. because the division comes from within the Hispanic migrant community instead of a division between Hispanic migrants and non-Hispanic natural born citizens. To understand how Cuban Americans became staunch supporters of conservative politics in comparison with other Hispanic voters, South Florida's political culture must be analyzed through the collective memory of the Cuban Revolution. One of the most memorable policies was the nationalization of education.[14] Every Cuban child was educated by the state as a way of building the new revolutionary Cuban population from scratch. By 1967, 85 percent of high school students attended countryside boarding schools away from family. The state had a cultural and moral monopoly over the Cuban youth, and rumors of children being taken away from their parents to be indoctrinated in the Soviet Union ran rampant.[15] This led to Operation Peter Pan, the largest organized migration of unaccompanied minors in the Western Hemisphere, where Cuban parents sent away 14,000 of their school-aged children to Miami for their protection.[16,17]

Cuban families continuously fought for an escape from revolutionary Cuba, but the departure was not easy, and its memory remains vivid in Cuban American collective history. Many did not have the financial assets to afford a safe departure, and those who did faced degrading incidents by airport staff as their few remaining possessions from home were confiscated without reason.[18] Miami soon became home to the second-largest Cuban population in the world.[19] In South Florida, the leading Cuban ideology branded the Castro government as illegitimate, and this sentiment was successfully ingrained into collective memory in South Florida politics.[20]

The Rise of Cuban American Media

Cuban American media in South Florida embodies the collective memory of Cuban exiles and became known as "exile media." Before 1959, only one newspaper existed in Spanish. By the 1970s, hundreds of print media were published by Cuban émigrés. The *periodiquitos*, or little newspapers, were both the most controversial and the most popular political tabloids. *Periodiquitos* were vehicles for propaganda targeted at Cuban Americans regarding upcoming demonstrations and lobbying efforts on the removal of Castro's government. While they did provide serious news coverage of Cuba, they also spread sensationalized and libelous messages by misquoting interviews and labeling critics as communists.[21] They maintained a loyal readership by influencing readers' emotions, such as with photographs of Cuban martyrs executed by Castro's government.[22] In 1976, the *Miami Herald* launched its Spanish language sister publication, *El Herald*, but it was not well-received. While *El Herald* was staunchly anti-Castro, it criticized the political intimidation practiced by exile media. As a result, *El Herald* was nicknamed "Moscow Herald." [23]

Across media sources, radio remains influential among Cuban Americans in South Florida. Popular Cuban radio personalities were hired and former Havana radio programming models continued. Since many Cuban émigrés could not understand English radio shows at the time, newly established Spanish language radio shows became Cuban émigrés' essential tool for community information on local welfare resources and answered questions about all aspects of American life.[24] With a well-established and loyal listener base, the radio manipulated its source of dependency and began promoting émigrés' political opinions, reinforcing what they already believed. Programming's political views were essentially conservative, with radio show hosts utilizing their platforms to accuse critical politicians, intellectuals, and business owners of being "communists," resulting in harassment of the accused and boycotting of local businesses by loyal listeners.[25] Its influence led to the FCC receiving numerous complaints from radio listeners accusing radio show hosts of political bias and racism in the 1970s and 1980s.[26]

The rise of Spanish language television came in the 1960s with the launch of WLTV-Channel 23, also known as Univision, which broadcasts soap operas, community services programs, documentaries, and traditional newscasts. The channel also emotionally appealed to its largely Cuban audience by broadcasting the Cuban national anthem twice a day with a minute-long film of famous Cuban landmarks throughout the 1960s and 1970s. This fostered dissent against the communist Cuban government and contributed to the foundation of South Florida's Cuban exile community. The representation in the media proved itself effective as Cuban émigrés did not have the need to engage with English language media. By the 1980s, Univision received the highest ratings in Miami-Dade County, surpassing ABC, NBC, and CBS. Spanish language television grew in its number of stations, and they maintain their conservative views and popularity today.[27]

The Media's Influence at the Polls

The *periodiquitos*, Spanish radio, and Spanish television boosted the most visible and influential group in South Florida's political, economic, and civic life. Compared to other Hispanic residents, Cuban Americans have higher rates of high school completion, naturalization, voter registration, and voter participation.[28] Spanish media mobilized voters in an anti-Castro political movement to the extent that any suspected Castro sympathizer had little chance of election in Miami-Dade County.[29] An "authoritarian enclave" resulted from this mobilization effort where the failure to conform to exile ideology could lead to severe ostracism from South Florida politics, and where Cuban American voters hold the capacity to uplift anti-Castro politicians with economic and political power at the polls.[30]

With his anti-communist political ideology, Ronald Reagan won 90 percent of Cuban American votes in Miami in 1984. This is not surprising considering wealthy Cuban business

leaders in Miami founded the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) in 1981 to support politicians with tough foreign policy stances on Cuba.[31] It is largely understood among politicians and campaign strategists that Cuban American voters cannot be taken for granted by politicians who want to win over the swing state of Florida.[32]

Diasporas and Democracy

The Cuban diaspora has proven itself loyal to American democracy and the retained hope for a liberal democracy in Cuba. This diaspora is a conflict-generated one formed from forced migration rather than émigrés solely seeking economic opportunity.[33] Cubans fled to the United States with the illusion of returning to their homeland with a government created on their terms.[34] Castro's government and legitimacy were contested abroad and the Cuban diaspora effectively obstructed friendly relations with the United States.[35] The Cuban diaspora is not the only group to flee a communist regime, but it is one of the few without the opportunity to return to a post-communist country.[36]

Most diaspora communities fleeing communism are theorized to support a democratization of their home country once they are socialized in a Western society with democratic values. This particular theory was formulated through an analysis of the democratization of post-communist countries and the influence from their ethnic diaspora communities. This theory draws its evidence from Ukrainian, Serbian, Albanian, and Armenian diasporas during and after the Cold War.[37] Similar to Cubans, these ethnic groups had limited contact with their homeland and relatives as their communist governments focused their resources on interrupting dissent coming from abroad and producing counterpropaganda to democratic values. Such diasporas experience political exile as a result of struggling to unseat authoritarian regimes back home.[38]

The Ukrainian diaspora during the Cold War also resorted to the media to engage in anti-communist propaganda. Like the Cuban diaspora, Ukrainians became involved with radio and newspapers in Western countries to share their dissent and disapproval of the communist government in Ukraine.[39] Unlike the Cuban diaspora, however, these European communist countries did eventually gain their independence and opened access to return home. Their post-communist struggles then revolved around gaining international support and recognition, especially by Western governments. Although not all became liberal democracies, the post-communist states in Eastern Europe did incorporate democratic values into their new governments, like free and fair elections. The learned democratic procedures are now used to advance unresolved nationalist goals.[40] Regardless of their differences, these diasporas are potential agents of democratization, and this theory offers an assumption as to how Cuban Americans may go about democratizing Cuba if the government were to be overthrown.

Conclusion

In the South Florida community, there is an undeniably large presence of Cuban émigrés carrying open wounds from revolutionary Cuba. Their collective memory is influential in public debate and consciousness.[41] The Republican support emanating from South Florida cannot exist without the Cuban American collective memory and Spanish language media. Spanish language media is a powerful institution sharing news about both the United States and Latin America, where in Miami, there is evidence of biased framing that promotes an exile ideology and isolates voters away from competing political agendas.[42]

A behavioral study conducted in 2008 showed that Hispanics in South Florida are less likely to support exile ideologies when they receive their news from English media.[43] As a source of media that is not a conduit of Cuban political culture, English media remains independent from exile ideology.[44] Unfortunately, English media is not accessible to all Spanish-speaking residents in Florida. Nevertheless, the anti-communist political strategy is spreading on social media, with easy translation mechanisms and unchecked bias, further polarizing our politics.

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Feminist Films As A Counter-Hegemonic Project

Anna Matos Mathis

The Leeds Animation Workshop Case

Introduction

The creation of a woman-only film collective, whose goal was to disrupt the misogynist and capitalist structure of Britain's society in the 1980s, is, undoubtedly, a counter-hegemonic process itself. The hegemony model of Pax Americana, known as the impact of U.S. military, economic, and political power since 1945, re-shaped the relationship not only between audience and production but also within the subjective and practical process of audiovisual creation. This model spread throughout the Cold War period, constructed a world polarized into two ideologies that fought for control, just as empires had done in previous centuries.[1] As a result, the collective belief that only one pole would triumph in the future potentialized new strategies to consolidate power. In that sense, the United States security strategy shifted from "containment'" to "entertainment," as "MTV" has reached places the CIA couldn't have reached.[2]

Henceforth, the dispute for an economic system that relied either on capitalistic or socialistic orders was in the past; neoliberalism was rising to shape individual's relations with culture, politics, and economy. In the United Kingdom, Thatcherism relied heavily on neoliberal ideology, establishing policies that encouraged the idea that women should be at home to care for the sick and elderly.[3]

American hegemony on film and Thatcherism Policies converged on the aspect of seeing films (and art, in general) as merchandise, the goal of which is strongly linked not only to power but also to profit[4]. In an antagonistic position to these neoliberal policies, women's audiovisual groups began to emerge in different scenarios as a disruptive movement rebelling against the devaluation of independent cinema[5]. Nonetheless, they went beyond, starting to use this entertainment tool to dispute the narrative of the status quo of women in our society, against Thatcher's beliefs. By doing so, they used audiovisual productions to claim workers' rights and to make a statement in that no woman should have fewer rights than a man.

Here, we will see how the collective Leeds Animation Workshop emerged as a tool of counter-hegemonic processes facing the rise of neoliberalism in the world, specifically manifested in Margaret Thatcher's cultural policies and the United States film hegemony. In this context, we shall not confine the research to a singular manifestation of hegemony, but rather to the notion of this concept in different contexts in the United States and United Kingdom during the final ten years of the Cold War, 1981-1991.

Film Hegemony

Power can be seen as the coercive ability one has, measured by the capacity of an actor to get others to do something they otherwise would not do[6]. In this sense, in a scenario where power is concentrated in a single state and is being used alongside a commanding position to maintain order, there is most likely to be a hegemonic power.[7] In a cultural aspect, Gramsci argued that cultural hegemony is "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group."[8] Having that in mind, it is almost unarguable that, during the 1980s, universal preference revolved around the universal legitimacy of American influence. In other words, the average order of what is right and what is valuable in the market and in general culture was established with American tools and

measurements.

Within broad aspects of cultural hegemony, there is the "film hegemony" that refers to the spontaneous consent given by the public to dominant films, including their products and providers. The study of cinema as a tool of influence on people's psychological orientation and social institutions[9] supports the comprehension of its consequences in threatening the status quo of an unequal social system — and it is on this idea of questioning the status quo that LAW rises.

British Independent Cinema, Thatcherism, and Hegemonic Operative

The film hegemony of the United States influenced British independent cinema in the 1980s, which was already facing significant challenges in a political endogenous scenario. Financial and administrative processes, such as industrial infrastructure, funding, and systems, started to change across the world to fit the American style. As a result, policies of privatization, individualism, consumption, and "enterprise culture" shaped the way film projects were financed in the UK, mainly affecting independent filmmakers.[10]

This dynamic of power was strongly supported by Thatcher's policy, which believed artistic projects, institutions, and museums should operate independently with their profits or with "private" money and without any investment of public money, massively cutting local funding for the arts. Thatcher's move to privatize the British film industry resulted in the abolition of the quota system and in the "privatization" of the National Film Finance Corporation, moving film policy towards the direction of 'pro-market' incentives: one of them being tax relief in order to increase private, rather than public, investment in the industry.[11]

The switch within the mechanism of funding and distribution relies simultaneously on a transformation of the concept of both profit and art itself. As the development of new sounds, visuals, and sign technologies continues, the path towards standardization became more solid. Independent studios and filmmakers had to adapt to a reality of filmmaking that mainly focused on profit and on those parameters that follow specific political guidelines. [12]

Thatcherism's goal was to restructure a nation's political identity, altering it on a superficial and subjective level.[13] In a hegemonic way, Margaret Thatcher tried, and arguably managed, to shape the whole texture of United Kingdom citizens social life, altering the way they perceived individualism, consumption, crisis, and solidarity. Thatcherism went beyond imposing economic rules, transforming people's views on art, work, and choice.

Paradoxically, in this chaotic scenario, the Leeds Animation Workshop emerged, a female-led animation collective whose goal was to politicize new women's groups and mobilize the UK audiovisual scene.

Leeds Animation Workshop And Counter-Hegemonic Action

The profile of the collective's founders comes from a diverse background strongly linked to social movements, with a politicized and feminist vision of art, social life, and education. The collective was part of a counter-hegemonic funding project for British independent cinema, called the "Workshop Sector." The workshop movement, characterized by a non-profit ethos and a commitment to equal participation in film production, fostered a culture that encouraged social and political contributions to society. Benefiting from a revenue grant from the BFI for several years, the Leeds Animation Workshop (LAW) stood out as one of the pioneering and longest-lasting British film workshops, amidst a peak period that saw the existence of around twenty such workshops.[14]

The disruptive and educational essence of the collective characterizes a counter-hegemonic process while facing three main orders: 1) the film hegemony of the United States, 2) Thatcher´s neoliberal policies, and 3) in a broader approach, misogyny itself. The first two

points were previously discussed in this article from a hegemonic theoretical perspective and will now be examined by those tools used by LAW to break this status quo and, finally, in how these mechanisms all face the devastation of a misogynist neoliberal structure.

LAW works as a not-for-profit organization, whereas films can be borrowed from libraries and are shown at political meetings, in schools, universities, and in educational training sessions for social movements. The focus of the screenings is much more connected to grassroots levels of education than mass cinema screenings, defending policies aligned with a feminist, antiracist, and anti-classicist society.[15]

Before distribution comes the elaboration of a film and the goal of its message. On what seems an ostensible choice, working with animation also reflects resistance and contrast with the status quo: animation recalls American studios, fantasy, and overpriced immortal worlds. On the other hand, LAW's films and characters are opposite of the fantasy world, exposing the cruelty of a neoliberal economic and political project.[16] Both the number and subject matter of images that can be put into animation are also a political tool: to talk about rubbish, deforestation, fires, acid rain, and devastated fields in a short period of time is to capture people's political imagination, constructing problems through images. This short time also favors engaged communities, because it can be shown in meetings, classrooms, and events, followed by a discussion and debate on the topic.[17]

The process of creating the works followed a pattern of study centered primarily on class, feminist, and race analyses. Due to the creators' grassroots origins, the methodology of filmmaking is aligned with values that respect the characters' roots and visions on the subject: they instigate dialogues with activists, educators, and other potential stakeholders to understand their claims; this process extends beyond local boundaries and can instigate regional, national, and even international levels of engagement.[18]

In "Council Matters" (dir. LAW, 1984), Freda transforms her vacuum cleaner into a flying broomstick, demystifying democracy with accessible language, humor, and regional emphasis on working-class communities. By doing this, the organization not only tightens the political identity within working class communities, but also connects them in a cultural-based level when highlighting its regionalisms and habits. This means that, on a counter-hegemonic perspective, individuals are not agreeing with the way of life that is imposed by the dominant group (London itself and the United States), but would rather talk about politics using their perspectives. In a related vein, "Risky Business" (dir. LAW, 1980) addresses worker safety and women's right, featuring a union safety representative advocating for better working conditions at the fabric. Following the same perspective on cultural identity, here we see the construction of the heroin as a tool of this process: her accent, behavior, and socioeconomic background links her to a Northern, working-class culture.[19] Meanwhile, LAW's 1983 film "Give us a Smile," boldly confronts sexism and police brutality by criticizing and denouncing a real case of sexism in the UK, where police officers attempted to imply women's guilt in rape cases. The grassroots origins of LAW is also portrayed in the movie, where many scenes are inspired by real protests and rallies organized by women — and that happened as a result of the case.

Each movie has a relevant and unique topic, but what they all have in common is the attempt to question the status quo of society, at that time, dictated mostly (but not only) by Margaret Thatcher and — more widely, the United States. Lant[20] says that LAW predates and survives Thatcher, although this analysis goes further: LAW survived and maintains one of the strongest cultural hegemonic orders seen in modern history, consolidating itself as a disruptive and counter-hegemonic tool in defense of a feminist, anti-colonial, and anti-racist society.

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Reimagining Citizen-Government Interactions

Nishita Karun

An RCT Proposal for Digital Grievance Redressals in Odisha, India

Abstract

In a democracy, there are two key aspects to political accountability: first, the people's ability to question the government; and second, documentation of answers from the government available to the general audience. In India, aside from a few state-level attempts, the only national-level means of grievance redressal is the Right to Information Act[1] (RTI). The portal created under the RTI Act requires payment for processing requests, has no feedback mechanism, and needs a significant amount of identifying information, making it inaccessible to a large part of the population. Moreover, the responses are provided through physical mail and email, neglecting any provision for public access. Other mediums at the state level have high personal costs; in-person submissions at government offices take time and lack anonymity, thus actively discourage reporting. Additional challenges arise due to the one-sided data collection, a lack of feedback mechanisms to assess resolution quality, and public analytics to enhance accountability. A potential solution is to make these discourses digitally available through an independent platform that is accessible, centralized, and public. Building an anonymous way to register grievances, facilitate accountability for governments, and provide them insight into the needs and wants of the citizens. This opens a channel to resolve information asymmetry between citizens and their local government through data and

digitization. Voters need space to raise questions on everyday concerns, act on them, and choose candidates that both better represent them and pursue their desired outcomes. My hypothesis is that, if citizens better understand the day-to-day operations of their local government, they will be more empowered to make more informed voting decisions. Furthermore, if local governments have insights into what areas of a citizen's welfare require greater attention, they will be able to address these issues more efficiently.

Background

The story begins in 2022 in rural Odisha, in eastern India, where self-coined 'Hashtag warriors'[2] stormed Twitter – now X – for 12 minutes every day at noon to call attention to local issues. The campaign, called *12baje12minute,*[3] highlights how Twitter emerged as the preferred digital platform in Odisha for grievance redressal after the outbreak of COVID-19. Currently there are approximately 70,000 families in rural areas who are using the platform to raise their issues to the government. This intervention became a starting point in my research to visualize how community-sourced data, politicians and civil society can use digital engagement to strengthen India's democracy and address the people's concerns.

India is celebrated for its organization of the largest democratic elections in the world for the past 75 years. However, democracy involves much more than simply holding elections. The 'by the people' mentality of strategically choosing one's respective representative that characterizes democracy is fading away[4]. Recent farmer protests, the abrupt introduction of the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA, 2019),[5] and police-led attacks on university campuses raise doubts[6] around whether citizens feel represented by elected officials or are losing trust in their government. This trend is not unique to India: a 2021 Ipsos survey[7] in 28 countries found that government officials and politicians are the least trusted people globally. This disconnect may be a result of mere narrative[8] or based on credible information about governments' failure to deliver on promises.[9]

In 2021, the US-based non-profit, Freedom House downgraded India from a 'free' to a 'partially free' democracy with its Global Freedom score.[10] In 2021, India was also labeled as an electoral autocracy[11] by Sweden-based Varieties of Democracy (VDem) Institute,[12] which evaluates various democratic factors where India ranks lower on account of reduced representation and accountability, particularly in the Egalitarian Component Index and Participatory Component Index. Moreover, other literature demonstrates the presence of elected representatives with criminal charges diminishes public trust and highlights accountability concerns, while the prevelant failure of elected officials to attend parliamentary sessions and engage in debates leads to ineffective governance.[13]

Productivity is missing from these indices, as it is difficult to measure in large hierarchical systems, but it remains a critical aspect of democracy. There is still data available to make inferences, as per *The Economist,*[14] the number of days per year that the Indian Parliament met fell from more than 100 in the 1950s to 66 in the 2014-19 term. The United States Congress, by comparison, is typically in session for more than 160 days a year during the same time period.[15] The erosion of democracy in India's legislative branch is no secret. In fact, during the winter session of 2023, 143 MPs (Member of Parliament) from the opposition were suspended for raising questions on a security breech incident in the Parliament.[16] Upon the incident, a prominent Congress (opposition) MP Shashi Tharoor proclaimed in response to the lack of freedom of speech, "Unfortunately, we have to start writing obituaries for parliamentary democracy in India." These labels reflect a broader trend of democratic erosion and highlight the need for reforms to strengthen democratic institutions and processes in India, ensuring accountability, enhancing public participation, and safeguarding freedoms.

Intervention

A potential solution is to make discourses

between citizens and governments on public welfare and services available through a digital, accessible, and public platform. This involves building an anonymous way to register grievances to facilitate government accountability and provide them with insights into the needs and wants of the citizens. It also means opening up a channel to resolve information asymmetry between citizens and their local government through data and digitization. Voters need space to voice their concerns, to build on action taken on their concerns, and to choose candidates that best represent them. The public can visualize a national-level digital platform beyond existing social media that allows citizens to raise tickets for local government bodies to be resolved with credible action. Creating a digital repository of information on the measurable impact of the representative's tenure would provide room for more intentional voting[17] during elections and higher turnouts to elect more effective and representative politicians. Through a crowd-sourcing mechanism, there is space for higher accountability[18] as local representation is under the eye of their voting group. For politicians, the portal acts as documentation of progress made on their goals, which they can cite in future elections. For new politicians, this can be the space where they build credibility through community involvement, commenting on concerns raised and gathering insights on true concerns.

Current research[19] demonstrates that political communication in forums, such as candidate debates, enhances political knowledge and participation of voters and improves government responsiveness. In Brazil, increased political participation of poorer voters leads to more redistributive policies,[20] which is a key challenge for growing economic disparity in India. In rural India, field experiments[21] found that knowledge interventions, such as political report cards,[22] radio campaigns,[23] and messenger applications,[24] are effective instruments for holding politicians accountable.

Experiment Design

This analysis led to the beginning of my work on building a citizen-government discourse platform in India, which features digital grievance redressal on a national scale. While designing the pilot as a Graduate Affiliate at the Centre for Democracy at University of Chicago, I designed a randomized control trial (RCT) proposal to verify the effectiveness of this platform. Through my experiment, my team focuses on the two primary hypotheses to address information asymmetry between citizens and their local government. I first hypothesize that a better understanding of local government operations by citizens leads to more informed voting and stronger government accountability. Simultaneously, when local governments gain insights into the welfare needs of their citizens, they can address these issues more effectively. These citizen-government dynamics guide my research question: **Does the provision of digital grievance redressal to the government enhance accountability through a shift to welfare spending and strategic voting?**

I plan to conduct this experiment along with a team in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha state in eastern India, which is among the largest in the state. The Mayurbhanj district has 26 Blocks, 3,966 Villages, and 404 Gram Panchayats, with a district sex ratio of 1,006 females for every 1,000 males and a literacy rate of 63.98%. Its present local government is a national leader in the provision of e-government services, providing an ideal context for our experiment.

I am developing the beta version of a grievance redressal platform which will be the key intervention in this research design, where citizens can anonymously raise issues [25] to the local government body in the form of tickets and offer ratings on their responses. This platform enables citizens to react to and comment on other citizens' complaints, view government responses and ratings provided by other citizens, and connect to social media platforms to build network effects. The crowdsourced data from the platform will populate data visualizations within the application regarding the number of

complaints addressed by the local government body. In the proposed experiment, we will randomly select half of the 404 Gram Panchayats to receive the treatment. The treatment will involve encouraging the installation and use of this platform at the community and individual levels to enable network effects and guidance to the local panchayats to respond to grievances raised on the platforms. The control group will have placebo access to the platform with limited marketing and no responses to grievances raised. At the Gram Panchayat (GP) level, we will measure four outcomes related to strategic voting and welfare responses. Under strategic responses, we examine the difference in trust perception of the local government and the decision-making process of voting for their Sarpanch (Gram Panchayat Head). We will determine the motivations for voting for a particular candidate in elections, which can be influenced by bribes, self-identity, party politics through the decision-making process of voting for their Sarpanch (Head of Local Government). We will also look at the trust levels for the local government by measuring the endorsement effect between the two groups by posing similar questions with different endorsements. We expect that our trust and strategic voting data will inform the theory of change — that if citizens better understand the day-to-day progress of their local government, they will be empowered to make more informed voting decisions. To avoid social desirability bias, we will offer a simple survey on digital devices which citizens can fill out without the enumerator observing their inputs.

Under welfare response, we will examine the Gram Panchayat's understanding of citizens' concerns in correlation with the grievance data collected from both control and treatment groups. The data will be collected through a Gram Panchayat member survey to get an understanding of what they treat as priority concerns and compare them with the data collected on the platform about key citizen grievances. This will help our team map the gap between the two stakeholders. We will also assess the improvement in the service delivery of five prime state-level government schemes in the domains of employment, health, and education. This data is collected by the state government for each GP and is also reflected in the budget allocation.

Limitations

The experiment is to be implemented with the beta version of the application, which is under development and should be ready by December 2024. We will be conducting power calculations for given outcomes through self-reported pilot data to determine the minimum detectable effect.

This digital platform faces several barriers to implementation. While people are becoming more accepting of digital tools, deploying a national resource like this would require increased investment in digital literacy training. Digital platforms have also been used as tools of polarization,[26] and models must be resilient against digital fraud and protect anonymity to allow freedom of expression. The Indian government will also need to invest more in its digital infrastructure, which lags behind compared to that of the private sector. One promising move in this direction is the Odisha government adopting a "5T model"[27] to ensure a tech-enabled governance reform system. The 5T guidelines — teamwork, technology, transparency, transformation, and time limit — mandate that the relevant government agency act on issues within 24 hours of a tweet.[28] While anonymity is required for the platform to provide equitable access without fear, we are working with the technology to make sure only credible profiles created through the Indian electoral ID can be registered. Given the vast disparity in digital literacy and regional context, user-friendly is a key priority, and we are looking into Natural Language Processing (NLP) for ease of filing complaints while also reducing the chances for unfavorable content on the platform. Finally, this experiment and use of such a digital tool requires on-the-ground implementation partners in different regions to contextually expand it across India.

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Spanish Language Articles

In a new initiative to connect with students and peers across the world, *Democracy & Society* opened submissions to Spanish language pieces from those attending universities in Spain and Latin America. The following pieces, "Digital Society, Political Communication, and Democracy" and "Latin America Facing the Crossroads of Disinformation in the Era of Digital Democracy," were submitted in Spanish and translated to English for publication.

Digital Society, Political Communication, and Democracy

Pablo Esteban López Fernández

A theoretical revision of the consequences of the digital society in political communication and democracy

1. Introduction

Digitalization is an unstoppable, global phenomenon. In 2024, there were more than 5.44 billion Internet users around the world, that is, almost two thirds of the world's population used the Internet, 5.07 billion of which were also social network users.[1] New technologies and digitalization have risen to what is now known as the Digital Society: a societal model that is characterized by its development, in the most part, in the virtual or digital space.[2] According to data from Pew Research, in 2018, 40% of 18 to 29-years-old reported being online "almost constantly."[3]

The advances in ICT (*information and communication technologies*) are the basis of the Third Industrial Revolution, [4] which will bring with it a massive change in the trends and systems of knowledge, in economic models, forms of production and consumption, and cultural and societal relations.[5] These abrupt changes that society is now starting to understand have received many names: digital society, society of information, surveillance capitalism, or infocracy, among others. The purpose of this paper is to foresee, using the knowledge offered by great social researchers, the potential consequences that digital society can have on social systems, and in particular, political communication in democratic systems.

2. Microtargeting and Communication; Fake News and Disinformation

Political microtargeting, also known as PMT, involves the compilation and analysis of people's personal data to send them political messages tailored to their specific characteristics.[6] This process relies on the use of data analysis technologies and algorithms to identify personality traits, political preferences, past behaviors, and other relevant data about individuals.[7] Once the data are compiled, they are used to send personalized political messages to specific groups of people with the goal of influencing their opinions and political behavior. This approach allows political actors to reach voters more precisely and effectively, adapting messages to the individual characteristics of each person.[8]

The data utilized in political microtargeting are compiled through different sources, such as social media sites, websites, mobile apps, surveys, and electoral records, among others. Social media sites, like Meta's Facebook and Instagram, Twitter (now "X"), and LinkedIn are an important source of data for political microtargeting, since users share their personal information, interests, and behaviors on these

platforms.[9] The data can also be collected through *cookies* and other tracking technologies on websites and mobile apps.[10]

Microtargeting uses psychometric profiles to personalize advertising and to influence the subconscious of consumers and voters. These political profiles are very similar to the profiles used by companies such as Amazon or Netflix to manage their tens of millions of users. With microtargeting, the focus shifts from the region to the individual. Most importantly, that individual is the only one who sees this personalized version of a said candidate or political issue.[11] Political marketers keep in-depth dossiers about netizens – a person who uses the internet[12] – and encourage them with a small amount of information to measure how they respond to it.[13] Information provided by political marketers is geared to each person's profile, exposing each person to different messages.[14] In this way, parties are abandoning general voter outreach programs, betting on political advertising that is personalized and adapted to the psycho-political profile of each individual. An example of this is the case of Cambridge Analytica.

The use of political microtargeting poses important ethical and political quandaries. In terms of human liberty, political microtargeting can be seen as a threat to people's privacy and their individual autonomy. The collection and use of personal data to send personalized political messages can be perceived as an invasion of privacy and a form of psychological manipulation. Additionally, the use of algorithms and data analysis techniques to identify personality traits and political preferences can limit the ability of individuals to make informed and autonomous decisions.[15]

In terms of liberal democracy, the use of political microtargeting poses important challenges for transparency and accountability. Given that political messages are sent to specific groups of people, it can be hard for citizens and regulators to know who they are being sent out to and with which messages.[16]

In terms of civil society, political microtargeting and the use of algorithms generate so-called "filter bubbles" and echo chambers, through which select information is spread and amplified by the repeated interactions of people with the same ideas. This way, netizens only receive information that confirms their pre-existing values and beliefs.[17]

Asymmetric information can increase political polarization and division in society, since citizens might have less opportunities to interact with people who hold different opinions. In addition, the use of personalized political messages that appeal to individuals' emotions and values can increase affective polarization,[18] which manifests in how individuals feel about candidates, parties, and over-simplified views of political adversaries.[19]

Political microtargeting reaches its maximum efficacy when it is combined with the spread of fake news and mis/disinformation.[20] Different political actors, such as the company Cambridge Analytica, use data analysis techniques and algorithms to identify specific groups of people that are more susceptible to believing in certain fake news or conspiracy theories.[21] This, coupled with the use of personalized political messages that appeal to people's emotions and values, allows for the spread of fake news and disinformation to increase. There are now various ways to try censuring these types of fake news, but the short-term effects of fake news are very difficult to mitigate, since, by the time they can be proven false, the desired political, electoral, or mediatic effect has already been produced.[22]

Segmented information through microtargeting, excessive emotionality, the dissemination of fake news and mis/disinformation, and the constant flood of information that requires immediate attention negates the ability to reflect and think critically. Information has a very short interval of actuality; it is ephemeral and lives on the attraction of surprise. Chul Han explains that discursive rationality is tempered by affective communication. Thinking and making rational decisions takes time; however, emotional news

affects individuals quickly.[23]

3. *The Society of Information or Surveillance Capitalism*

Few authors disagree with the perception that today's society is under surveillance and controlled by the owners of the digital space. Castells states that the total digitalization of communication allows the creation of the largest global network of surveillance and control in history.[24] Santiere explains that the surveillance inherent to the digitalization of information, moreover, implies a constant control that goes beyond closed surveillance models; all of this freely facilitated through cell phones, GPS, credit cards, social media, and so on.[25]

The information regime is the form of domination in which information and its processing through algorithms and artificial intelligence decisively determine social, economic, and political processes.[26] For Han, psycho-political surveillance and the control and forecasting of behavior are the characteristics of an information regime. Now, the decisive factor in the acquisition of power is not the ownership of the means of production, but the access to information.[27] The possession of information is power.

Shoshana Zuboff defines surveillance capitalism as:

> 1. "The new economic order that claims for itself the human experience as free, raw materials exploitable for a series of hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sale." 2. "The parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinate to a new global architecture of behavioral modification." 3. "The unscrupulous mutation of capitalism characterized by large concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power that have no precedent in human history."[28]

As the Harvard University professor explains, surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims the human experience for itself, understanding it as a free, raw material that can be translated into behavioral data. Some of this data is used to improve goods or services; the rest is considered as behavioral surplus of the companies themselves and is used as input for advanced production processes known as machine intelligence, which yield products that predict what anyone might do.[29] In this way, companies profit from individuals' data, selling information about their lives.[30] Human beings are not only mere components in this process, but also contribute to its maintenance and development.

"The individual under an information regime is not docile or obedient; rather, he believes he is free, authentic, and creative."[31] The information regime does not work through coercion, but through the creation of needs. Through incentives, liberty is exploited, controlling the will of people on an unconscious plane. It is this felt freedom that sustains the functioning of the system.[32]

Thanks to the advancements in new technologies, the human experience can be reduced to observable and measurable behaviors while remaining indifferent to the meaning of that experience. The data offer a reliable prediction of people's behavior. In this way, the behavior of human beings can be predicted and modified. As Pentland explains, more than education, reflection, or dialogue, the fundamental basis of social learning is the influence and imitation of the people with whom they interact.[33] Thus, social media and digital communication environments are the perfect testing ground for social learning and behavioral modification.

Power in the digital society operates through the means of behavioral modification.[34] Based on radical behaviorism, social media and other digital media have been designed to *hack* the dopamine reward circuits. Social media rewires our brain so that users continuously need instantaneous rewards. When users receive a notification or a *like*, they receive a short-term reward that fires in the form of dopamine.[35] This leads to an increased demand for attention,

which fuels an addictive mentality. In this way, individuals' minds are penetrated, their data, even the most intimate ones, are accessed. Subsequently, social architects analyze the obtained information to determine general patterns of behavior and then proceed to make behavioral changes that benefit the architects. As Harari explains, hacking human beings requires three things: a knowledge of biology, a lot of data, and a great informational capacity.[36]

All of this represents a total subversion of the values on which Western, liberal society has been based. Liberal democracy has been sustained by a series of arguments and institutions that are meant to protect individual liberties against oppressive governments or religions; however, it does not possess defense mechanisms against a system that undermines liberty and individual autonomy from within – one that preys on instincts, emotions, and impulses.[37]

4. The Society of Information and Democracy

The surplus of information has degenerated democracy into infocracy, not without first going through a *mediacracy*.[38] The smartphone makes people addicted and compulsive when it comes to producing and consuming information. News is short-sighted and sensationalist, making it increasingly difficult to reflect on political information and rational decision-making. Democracy is weakened by this short-termism and sensationalism.

Voters face greater obstacles in assessing a political party's policy goals and are led to focus only on the electoral advertising that is personalized and adapted to their psychogram, even via fake news. This manifested manipulation poses a great threat to democracy.[39] Dark ads appear, or those that are only visible to the editor and the susceptible group,[40] and contribute to the list of social manipulation techniques without transparency, which degrades democratic principles.

While democracy is founded upon a diverse 'us' that listens and does not renounce communicative rationality, social media creates tribes and resonance bubbles that tend to reinforce identities while rejecting any form of dialogue and rationality.[41]

The Internet is now essential for social participation. Modern society is characterized by digital presence – by living, more and more, in a virtual space. The great majority of social relations in the information society (work, leisure, consumption, or interpersonal relationships) are carried out digitally.[42] Technological firms and digital platforms possess an exclusive concentration of knowledge and power that allows them to have privileged influence over the division of social learning. This means that an enormous part of the social order is in the hands of private enterprises.[43] On one hand, this enormous presence of the digital (digital society) threatens the institutions that sustain democracies. As Zuboff explains, this type of digital society (or surveillance capitalism) replaces the legitimate social contract, the rule of law, politics, and social trust with a new form of sovereignty and a new regime of reinforcements administered by private forces.[44]

On the other hand, the ownership and management of the means of behavioral modification entail an unjustified intrusion into people's private spheres, which poses a threat to intimacy and personal autonomy. The devices individuals use daily also meticulously control all that society does and desires.

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Latin America Facing the Crossroads of Disinformation in the Era of Digital Democracy

Facundo Robles

Introduction

In the backdrop of the independence processes that have shaped the history of Latin America, crucial questions arise regarding the direction of democracy in the region. With deep scars stemming from the inherent conflicts in choosing the model of self-government, democratic advancements are challenged by persistent setbacks. Despite notable electoral progress, the regional survey Latinobarómetro 2023 reveals entrenched distrust, where "only 48% support democracy in the region, which marks a decrease of fifteen percentage points from the 63% in 2010."[1]

This article delves into Latin America's current crossroads, marked by an extraordinary electoral supercycle between 2021 and 2024. As noted by Daniel Zovatto, this phenomenon unfolds in a period characterized by "the erosion of trust in democracy."[2] Through an analysis focused on the relationship between trust in democracy and disinformation, this article will explore the complex interactions between policies, institutions, and digital platforms.

The following journey will first address disinformation, from its definition to its various manifestations in Latin American electoral cycles, highlighting the urgency of understanding the intentionality behind misinformation. Secondly, recognizing that the influence of disinformation becomes more evident in an interconnected world, the role of social media will be analyzed, which emerges as catalyst for the spread of disinformation, generating disorder where facts and emotions intertwine to create false narratives. Thirdly, the role of trust, a cornerstone of democratic interactions closely linked to the effectiveness of public institutions, will be studied. Research highlights susceptibility to disinformation in contexts of low trust and high polarization, emphasizing the importance of building informed societies committed to democratic systems.

In summary, this article addresses the challenges of digital democracy in Latin America, exploring the erosion of trust, the complex relationship with disinformation, and the pressing need for effective public policies. How we address these challenges will define the future of democracy in the digital era for the Latin American region.

Disinformation in Electoral Cycles

Disinformation, defined as the widespread dissemination of false information with the conscious intention to deceive the public, becomes a matter of particular concern in electoral contexts. Examples range from spreading false rumors about rival candidates to unfounded accusations of corruption or statements taken out of context to discredit an opponent. This phenomenon not only threatens to undermine trust in the democratic process but can also compromise the legitimacy of a process vital for the functioning and existence of a democratic society.[3] It is crucial to recognize the difference based on intentionality in the realm of misinformation.

Over time, new challenges have emerged in response to information consumption trends and connectivity changes. Both disinformation, characterized by the spread of false information to deceive, and misinformation, which spreads without the intention to deceive, have begun to significantly impact communications.[4] Disinformation, in particular, shapes an order that competes with reality, an order where facts and emotions intertwine to create false narratives. In this process, emotions take greater relevance than facts and arguments. Disinformation thus becomes a key component of this disorder. [5]

Laura Zommer, executive director of Chequeado, has systematically identified different types of disinformation in Latin American electoral cycles. These range from misinterpreting electoral irregularities to the coordinated dissemination of alleged fraud by authorities to claims of votes cast on behalf of deceased individuals, among other strategies.[6] This panorama highlights the complexity and variety of challenges facing the region in the realm of electoral disinformation.

The Crucial Role of Social Media in the Era of Disinformation

In a world where connectivity is constant —we are connected to the Internet twenty-four hours a day— and information spreads at a speed exceeding verification capacity, its influence becomes crucial. Social media platforms position themselves as the optimal platform for disseminating disinformation. Diplomat and academic Eduardo Ulibarri argued that "social media has been the main trigger for a powerful succession of 'alternative facts,' false narratives, *fake news,* conspiracy theories, impostures, and lies trying to pass as true."[7]

However, before proceeding, it is essential to clarify two crucial points for the theme of this text. First, this article does not claim that social media generates disinformation, but we do recognize that the documented problems on these platforms and the increased exposure to a wider range of sources seem to impact the trust people place in the information they encounter. As described by Ulibarri, "many of the evils we blame on social media today are actually old and have multiple paternity…What social media has done is maximize and spread them."[8] Originally designed to connect family and friends, social media is becoming a fundamental stage for electoral campaigns, transforming the dynamics of political engagement.[9] The convergence of social media as fundamental platforms for both political campaigns and disinformation directly impacts the core of democracy.

Second, the article does not suggest that disinformation directly leads to voting for a specific candidate but instead encourages skepticism and disaffection. As pointed out by visiting professor and Prince of Asturias chair at Georgetown University, Juan Luis Manfredi, along with Zhao Alexandre Huang, disinformation seeks to affect judgment and perceptions but is unlikely to automatically impact voting behavior.[10]

With these clarifications, it is crucial to examine the population's behavior towards disinformation in the region. According to the Americas Barometer, less than half (44%) of the population in the Latin America and Caribbean region has recently verified the accuracy of information online.[11] Additionally, 62% of people express concern about identifying the difference between real and fake news online.[12] Despite obstacles in regulation against disinformation due to conflicting interests and rights, it is imperative to continue verifying information and communicating about disinformation since individuals with greater awareness of the problem are more likely to report their exposure to disinformation.[13]

Interconnected Challenges

If we were to stop here, it might seem that social media is the sole and primary culprit for the current situation regarding disinformation. However, as is the case in many other instances, reality is more complex. According to economist Razvan Vlaicu:

> "Research reveals that people are more susceptible to disinformation when trust in the political system is low and political polarization is high. These conditions describe many Latin American democracies. Low trust and high polarization likely reflect persistent problems in economic, social, and governance outcomes. But the fact that the negativity of social media is exacerbated in these contexts suggests that the region is especially vulnerable to the risks posed by unregulated social media."[14]

Here, we could delve into a virtuous circle between trust and the effectiveness of public institutions, although we won't delve into this at this moment. However, what is important to highlight is that, in the words of the Inter-American Development Bank's lead specialist, Juan Cruz Vieyra, and consultant Vivian Purcell, "trust is an important part of countless interactions that are essential for building informed societies, committed to democratic systems, and empowered to exercise accountability."[15] In order to consolidate trust in public institutions, "transparency and access to understandable and updated information" are fundamental.[16]

This complex interaction, where policies with poor outcomes, opaque or manipulated institutions, and non-transparent statistics intertwine with digital platforms that facilitate data distribution, generates an additional difficulty in resolving the conflict of disinformation and its impact on trust and democratic quality.

Conclusion

At the crossroads between digital connectivity, democratic trust, and the challenges of disinformation, Latin America finds itself at a critical moment. The complex interaction between policies, institutions, and digital platforms has revealed the urgent need to address the emerging phenomenon of digital democracy. This article has explored how disinformation, especially in electoral contexts, threatens to undermine the foundations of democratic society. This is alarming in a context marked by the erosion of trust in democracy, highlighting its manifestation in the recent electoral supercycle.

The relationship between social media and disinformation underscores the importance of addressing broader structural problems, such as low trust in the political system and high polarization. The risks posed by unregulated social media highlight the region's vulnerability, emphasizing the need for public policies that strengthen trust in institutions.
Digital resilience is not a problem to be addressed solely by one or two organizations; it is an opportunity to demonstrate that we are capable of collective efforts among governments, technology companies, telecommunications organizations, civil society, media, and academia to preserve a fundamental value: the truth.

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14. Vlaicu, "Is Social Media Remaking Latin American Elections?"
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Program Highlights

During the 2023-2024 academic year, the Democracy & Governance program welcomed our 18th class of incoming students in the Fall of 2023 Isabella Absi, Tala Alahmar, Abdulaziz Alenezi, Clayton Asai, Lily Ashbrook, Roudah Chaker, Kal Desta, Zora Hermans, Gauri Kaushik, Hamza Khan, Donya Lechqer, Yufu Liang, Brianna Ma, Jonathan Mendoza, Andriy Nix, Michael Parisi, Saroy Rakotoson, Fahad Saad, Alex Szlabowicz, Megan Tamisiea, Justin Wanki, Jacquelene Wu, Michelle Ye, and Nicholas Zochowski.

In October, 2023 graduate students from the Democracy & Governance program organized the Georgetown Parlor event on Democracy and Autocracy in the Digital Age. Graduate students from various disciplines and diverse backgrounds rarely have opportunities to engage peers from different departments in an open academic setting, thus Georgetown Parlor brought students together for a two-hour, student-led, open conversation on contemporary issues each semester of the 2023-2024 academic year. Special thanks to Leesa Danzek, for helping organize this set of events.

On October 12th, we held our annual career panel and networking reception. Panel members discussed the evolution of the fields of democracy, governance, and development, and how they structured their own studies and professional careers. The panel featured Shari Bryan, a member of the advisory board of Georgetown University's M.A. Program in Democracy and Governance, and Managing Partner, Aegean Strategies; Danielle Pearl '10, Evidence and Learning Lead, USAID, and Kion Bordbar '23, Program Associate, National Democratic Institute (NDI).

On October 17th, as part of the Democracy & Governance program speaker series "Trending... In Elections," Professor Jeff Fischer hosted a panel discussion on The Impact of AI on Elections – Four Perspectives: Platforms, Political Consultants, Election Administrators, and Regulators.

This webinar was moderated by Jeff Fischer, Senior Fellow of the Democracy and Governance program and featured expert panelists: Rebecca Thein, Fellow, Integrity Institute; Donald Palmer, Commissioner on the United States Election Assistance Commission, Timothy Davis, Senior Elections Cyber Threat Intelligence (CTI) Analyst at the Elections Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (EI-ISAC), Larry Huynh, Co-Founder of Trilogy Interactive, Katie Harbath, Chief Executive of Anchor Change.

On March 12th, 2024, our program hosted the V-Dem Institute's Professor Staffan I. Lindberg for a discussion about the latest trends for democracy and autocracy in the world and

across regions, based on this year's Democracy Report titled "Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot."

On March 20th, our Center for Democracy and Civil Society (CDACS) organized the 2nd Democracy and Governance Student Research Symposium. The event was an opportunity for MA students from DMV area universities who are focused on democracy and governance to present their independent research and projects, gain practical presentation experience, connect with other young people in the field, and make career connections with established professionals looking for new ideas and innovations. Special thanks to Katja Volz for helping to organize this event.

On April 15th, our program hosted the president of Open Society Foundations, Mark Malloch-Brown who gave the Georgetown University Department of Government 2024 William V. O'Brien Lecture in International Law and Morality titled "To Make War Safer, Make Peace Safer."

Our program co-hosted two events as part of Georgetown University's Global Dialogues: Ways Forward in a Divided World. Our university hosted leading intellectuals from the Global South to engage in conversations with U.S.-based thinkers in April 2024. Additionally, events on Social Inequality as a Complex Global Challenge and Revitalizing Democracy: The Faith Dimension highlighted challenges and opportunities for consolidated and emerging democracies.

Following last year's successful Bulgaria Exchange, the Democracy & Governance program at Georgetown University participated on June 2-9th in a study trip to Northern Ireland and Ireland. Our student and faculty group examined topics of divided society and coexistence, peacebuilding, and power-sharing. Our program collaborated with the Center for International Experiential Learning.

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