Is Digital Authoritarianism Still a Useful Concept?

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SUMMARY

I outline four strategies used by nondemocratic regimes to deal with threats posed by internet technology: blocking, filtering, co-opting, and flooding. Strategies of blocking and filtering rely on suppressing flows of information, and are thus easily identifiable with nondemocratic regimes. However, the more recent strategies of co-option and, in particular, flooding, rely not on hindering information flows but on facilitating them – even while the information itself is false, distracting, or otherwise worthless. Flooding lives comfortably inside democracies, is easily generated by domestic actors, and is compatible with democratic norms. The same free flows of information that make the disruption of democracy by censorship impossible also make the disruption of democracy by flooding easier. As a result, the distinction between digital autocracy and digital democracy is increasingly untenable. The distinction may even be harmful because it falsely emphasizes foreign threats that seek to undermine democracy from without. In fact, the real threat is largely from within.

What began as optimism about the potential of “liberation technology” quickly curdled into disappointment as autocrats learned to censor, subvert, and co-opt social media for their own purposes. Roughly speaking, this evolution can be divided into four stages: blocking, filtering, co-opting, and flooding.

These are not substitutes, in the sense that earlier strategies have been replaced by later ones, but complements. That is, governments have increasingly used all four as part of their repertoire. However, the latter two do not rely on a conventional understanding of autocratic control – a model in which social media and nondemocratic regimes are assumed to have an inherently adversarial relationship. This has some crucial and potentially disruptive implications that I will discuss in the memo.

Blocking. This familiar strategy involves a brute-force denial of internet access to protestors or other potential threats to the regime. It remains the go-to tool for autocrats seeking to deal with perceived dangers to the regime. Last year, for example, saw 196 internet shutdowns, compared to only 75 in 2016. Continuing the upward trend, the first half of this year alone has seen 114 shutdowns in 23 countries.

Filtering. A more sophisticated strategy than brute-force blocking, filtering involves autocratic regimes deciding which content is censored and which content is allowed to remain online despite its apparently controversial content. For example, King, Pan, and Roberts (2013) found that China’s government was not more likely to censor “negative, even vitriolic” criticism of the government and its leaders. Instead, the government censored content that threatened to spur collective action via organized protest. The ultimate goal here was not to silence all criticism but to “reduce the probability of collective action by clipping social ties whenever any collective movements are in evidence or expected.”
**Co-opting.** In this strategy, governments move beyond merely suppressing online discourse, and proactively subvert and co-opt social media for their own purposes. Namely, social media has increasingly enabled non-democratic regimes to 1) safely gather previously hidden or falsified information about public grievances, 2) to increase the transparency of the performance of local officials, 3) to bolster regime legitimacy by shaping public discourse, and 4) to enhance the mobilization of their own support base.\(^iv\)

For example, China’s former president Hu Jintao told *The People’s Daily* that the Internet “is an important channel for us to understand the concerns of the public and assemble the wisdom of the public.” And Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny observed that the Putin regime uses the Internet as a “focus group” to find out the concerns and desires of ordinary Russians. In this way, social media allows autocrats to get a much clearer view of people’s real opinions – and therefore anticipate potential unrest – without prying open the larger marketplace of ideas.\(^v\) Similarly, Xiao Chiang, editor of the blog *China Digital Times*, has argued that outrage on social media is sometimes the only channel for party officials to get honest feedback about their local apparatchiks.

Unlike censorship, these tactics strengthen the regime rather than just mitigate the effects of dissent. In a sense, autocrats have moved beyond strategies of “negative control” of the internet, in which regimes attempt to block, censor, and filter the flow of communication, and toward strategies of proactive co-optation in which social media serves certain key regime-enhancing functions.\(^vi\)

What are the implications of non-democratic co-option of internet technology?

*First*, citizen participation in social media may not signal regime weakness, but may in fact enhance regime strength and adaptability. Even the harshest dictators have an incentive to allow some degree of social media freedom—enough to gauge public opinion but not so much that discussion spills over into protest. Consequently, evidence of online debate is not necessarily a sign of regime weakness but a harbinger of its durability.

*Second*, democratization in hybrid and autocratic regimes may become stuck in a low-level equilibrium trap, as these regimes become responsive enough to subvert or pre-empt protests without having to undertake fundamental liberalizing reforms or loosen their monopoly over political control. While social media may make regimes more responsive at the local level, it also produces a shallow sort of democracy, in which populist causes like municipal corruption are taken up by the central government, sometimes with great fanfare, even as the chances of fundamental reform like multi-party competition become more remote.

*Third*, social media co-option may help regimes inoculate themselves from the reach of transnational social movements as well as domestic reforms, portending greater obstacles for the diffusion of successful protest across borders.

*Fourth*, more speculatively, hybrid regimes may become increasingly less likely to use elections as a way of gathering information, revealing falsified preferences, coordinating elites, channeling grievances, and bolstering regime legitimacy. Why risk losing even a rigged election if less risky but similarly effective alternatives are at hand? Closed autocracies, which have traditionally existed in a particularly information-scarce environment, may have fewer incentives to introduce elections in the future.
Flooding. Roberts (2014) uses this term to describe the Chinese government’s strategy of overwhelming citizens with “cheap” information. Flooding assumes that censorship will not always succeed, and may in fact be counterproductive. Instead, the focus is on deluging potential readers with a variety of provocative or self-contradictory information. The ultimate goal is cynicism, disengagement, and the fragmentation of a shared social reality.

Instead of relying only on censorship tactics of blocking and filtering, write Farrel and Schneier (2019), nondemocratic regimes “seed public debate with nonsense, disinformation, distractions, vexatious opinions and counter-arguments, making it harder for their opponents to mobilize against them.” The goal is to create a “strategic distraction from collective action, grievances, or general negativity” about the regime. (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017:497)

The Russian-language term for this strategy, incidentally, is инфошум – literally, “info-noise”. The Russian government increasingly appears to see flooding as a viable alternative that allows the government to maintain influence in the informational space without resorting to transparently dictatorial measures.

For example, when faced with a damaging event like the Skripal poisoning, the Russian government’s response (operating in part through state-controlled media) was to flood the informational space with potential explanations, however implausible. The journalist Alistair Bunkall enumerated 19 theories put forward, with possible culprits ranging from suicide to Slovaks to Yulia Skripal’s future mother-in-law.

As Henry Farrell and Bruce Schneier have argued, the effects of flooding, and the fragmentation of social reality that comes with it, varies across regime types. Democracies require a degree of social consensus to function, one created by a shared belief in some common reality. Such a consensus does not expect people to agree, but it does expect shared knowledge of what they disagree about. (To borrow from Daniel Patrick Moynihan, you are entitled to your own opinions but not your own facts.)

Autocracies, on the other hand, benefit from the distrust, cynicism, and social atomization produced by flooding, precisely because it inhibits public deliberation and collective action while paralyzing organized social movements. Thus disinformation, social media echo chambers, info-noise, deepfakes, and radicalization algorithms may all serve to lower the costs of autocracy while undermining the basic pre-requisites of democratic deliberation.

The goal of flooding is not to dominate the informational space but to dilute it. It produces a world in which, as the title of Peter Pomerantsev’s 2015 book on Russian media put it, “nothing is true and everything is possible.” The opposite of internet freedom, therefore, is not internet censorship but a deceptive blend of control, co-option, and manipulation.

What are the implications of flooding for democratization?

First, the implications of flooding should be separated into its domestic and foreign variants. These are similar in methods but different in their goals. Domestic flooding (e.g. China’s 50-cent army) is a way to stabilize autocratic regimes domestically. Foreign flooding (e.g. Russia’s troll armies posting on English-language websites) is a way to destabilize democratic regimes abroad. The goal of domestic
flooding is to depoliticize, the goal of foreign flooding is to politicize, even if both are accomplished via social atomization.

Domestic flooding is not a conventionally sanctionable offense. It does not bear the clear stamp of autocracy in the same way as traditional methods like domestic censorship. Foreign flooding is on shakier ground. Russia’s attempts to flood US voters with disinformation may constitute a form of interference, but so far this has not led to much of a response. The key thing to keep in mind is that Russian interference is a process, not an event.

Second, flooding (as well as co-option) may offer autocracies a way out of the “Dictator’s Dilemma”. Allowing the increased availability of information is crucial for regimes desiring economic development and global integration, but also threatens their existence by allowing unfettered flows of information. However, co-option and flooding allows governments to reap the benefits of online technology without suffering its destabilizing costs. In the long run, therefore, the assumption that increased access to information will overturn autocratic regimes is probably unjustified.

Third, and this is perhaps the most radical implication: it makes less and less sense to speak of “digital authoritarianism” versus “digital democracy”. Strategies of blocking and filtering rely on suppressing flows of information, and so are easy to identify with nondemocratic regimes. Strategies of co-option and in particular flooding, are quite different. They rely not on hindering information flows but on facilitating them (even while the information itself is false, distracting, or otherwise worthless). They thus live quite comfortably inside democracies and are perfectly compatible with them.

Put another way, we don’t see much blocking and filtering inside what we conventionally call democratic states. We do see, however, a lot of flooding, amplified by the presence of multiple media actors with competing strategies of political persuasion and mobilization. The problem is not a malevolent force that exists “outside” democracies. That is, trolling and disinformation is not something primarily done to the US by external actors like Russia. Instead, it stems from domestic actors within the US, and benefits precisely from the same unfettered discourse that is crucial in a functioning democracy.

Those same flows of information that make disrupting democracy by censorship impossible also make disrupting democracy by flooding easy. The tactics of flooding – trolling, distraction, conspiracy theorizing – are commonly deployed in both autocracies and democracies. Pomerantsev used “nothing is true and everything is possible” to describe Russian politics, but the same phrase neatly captures key elements of current U.S. politics.

In sum, the distinction between digital authoritarianism and digital democracy is increasingly untenable. In fact, it may even be harmful, because it poses a politically convenient but false dichotomy of an external threat that threatens to undermine democracy from without. In fact, the real threat is largely from within.
See, e.g., Deibert and Rohozinski 2010.


Not all of these are political in nature. Iraq, for example, shuts down internet services during exam week to deter students from cheating.


King, Pan, and Roberts 2013:1.

These developments are laid out in detail in Gnutsky (2015), where I examine four mechanisms that link social media co-option to autocratic regime durability: 1) countermobilization, 2) discourse framing, 3) preference divulgence, and 4) elite coordination.


See also, e.g., Lorentzen 2013.

https://bostonreview.net/forum/henry-farrell-bruce-schneier-democracys-dilemma

Two caveats. One, the tactic is not limited to Russia, of course. China was one of the early adopters of this strategy via its 50-cent army, in which posters were paid to post government-friendly messages. Two, the use of flooding does not mean that Russia has given up on strategies of control, as manifested by its recent attempts to block the instant messaging app Telegram, as well as intensified recent efforts to build a “sovereign internet”.

https://twitter.com/AliBunkallSKY/status/981983837759639559


If so, this would be a curious inversion of Anderson (1983), who argued that new technology in the form of print capitalism allowed the creation of shared imaginary communities in the first place.