

Essay

Autocratic techno-challenge and civil liberties in the cyberspace

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Students of the Václav Havel Joint Master Programme - European Politics and Society created essays dedicated to the crucial topics of the 25th Forum 2000 Conference titled What Now? Building Back Democratically. Evaluation Committee selected 5 best essays out of 46. All topics are focused on building back democratically after COVID-19, addressing the challenges that democracies are facing today.

Democratization of digital space is one of the major current world challenges that need to be addressed. The UN General Assembly has adopted a non-binary resolution that considers internet access as a human right. However, making the internet accessible is half of the problem, the other is making sure that human rights and democratic values are respected and preserved within cyberspace. Given the practices observed in authoritarian states, where governments implement various techniques to manipulate, silence, and suppress civil society, democracies around the world should be allied, according to many experts, to address the challenges of democratization of digital space. However, as this article argues, to tackle the autocratic techno-challenge, democracies should, first and foremost, focus on the regulation of the tech industry. Considering the rapidly increasing importance and influence of tech companies, the unregulated tech industry could become the main obstacle towards the democratization of digital space.

Authoritarian governments around the world have been aggressively exploiting new technologies to extend their power through controlling and manipulating societies without any supervision or repercussion, both nationally and internationally. Thus, since digital technology is a liberating force, authoritarian regimes not only violate their citizens' privacy and basic liberties but also their dignity. As a result, autocracies are winning the race for dominance within cyberspace. Authoritarian governments in China, Cuba, Brazil, Russia, and other parts of the world have mastered various techniques to control their civil society, manipulate narratives in digital space, and create an artificial consensus. Thus, they have been able to create a different reality than most people are experiencing. Thus, democracies need to acknowledge the significance and eventual lethality of authoritarian techno-challenge and address the attempts to undermine civil liberties.

However, authoritarian regimes controlling and blocking the content are one of the two evils. Another is, equally detrimental if not more, the issue of unregulated big tech industry accumulating power and influence by collecting users' digital data. The issue, however, is that big tech giants maintain different business relations with democracies vis-à-vis autocracies. In this sense, income motives should be taken into consideration to understand big tech's ambiguity on human liberties and democratic values within their platforms. For instance, the tech giants have started compromising with authoritarian governments to gain access to the market. Moreover, autocracies, heading towards techno-world dominance, are attracting many tech companies to collaborate to enhance security and scrutiny.

Collaboration between democracies and NGOs, unfortunately, is not enough to tackle the autocratic techno-challenge. And without tech giants, the struggle for a common cause is even most likely doomed to fail. However, taking the tech's priorities - cash over principles, can democracies protect their values in digital space? Thus, a set of regulations should be formed to avoid an accumulation of power in the hands of a small group of tech companies. The main problem is that these companies lack transparency and disclose their operationalization process from the public eye. As a result, having no clues in what biases are integrated into algorithms, democracies are most likely to fail to protect human rights and democratic values in digital space.

The demand to regulate the tech industry and campaigns for abolishing surveillance and reducing government control should be on-demand. Civil society should have a say in shaping the rules by which the tech companies are playing. It should obtain a key role in defining how the ethics of algorithms should be designed to ensure that technology prioritizes civil liberties first. It should find a way to pressure big tech owners to not compromise on those values with autocracies. Society's demands for obtaining a voice in shaping regulations should be the main feature of democratic countries, which cannot be observed in authoritarian ones.

In conclusion, democratic values are preserved by uniting and collaborating with entities promoting those values, both regionally and internationally. However, big tech companies, exerting a major influence on our lives, could become a major

obstacle to the unitary efforts to prevent autocracies from dominating cyberspace. Not taking immediate actions or preserving the status quo is most likely to lead to autocracies setting the rules in the digital space and curbing the democratization of it. Thus, regulating the tech industry should be the first and foremost priority for democratic communities around the world.

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