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Editorial

Authoritarianism in the digital age

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Authoritarianism is far from being a new phenomenon, but, as the papers in this edition describe, its contemporary form is being reshaped, facilitated, and potentially challenged by the ready availability of diverse digital technologies and infrastructures. From smart, state systems that mediate citizenship and manage populations; to social media and its capacity to spread information both supportive and hostile to political regimes; to biometric, datafied, surveillance systems weaponised against foreign and internal 'enemies', the digital is firmly rooted in the contemporary realisation of autocratic and illiberal politics and how human rights and social and economic relations are being recast around the world. Collectively, the commentaries in this edition chart how political and economic actors are gaining and asserting power through, within, and over the digital. From diverse geographic and disciplinary perspectives, they raise ways of thinking about this particular historical moment in the hope of generating further dialogue on how we might challenge or resist democratic drift, illiberalism, and authoritarianism in the digital age. We firmly wish that this issue was not so necessary and relevant to so many contexts (different national geographies, diverse technological systems and their applications, and the varying dimensions of everyday life where the effects of authoritarianism are experienced), but alas, it is, we believe, a timely intervention given the current state of politics across the globe.

Authoritarianism in the twenty-first century

Authoritarianism is a form of political rule characterised by limited political pluralism, the repression of democratic ideals and institutions, and the suppression of individual freedoms of thought and action. In practice, it is not simply defined and takes many forms, typified by degrees of freedom, inclusion, openness, accountability, and participation, concentration of power and expressions of state violence, as well as the depth and operation of formal democratic mechanisms (Kailitz, 2024). In this edition, we have taken an expansive approach to the term, allowing contributors to define authoritarianism as they see most fit, capturing both practices of illiberalism (threats to individual privacy, autonomy, dignity, and democracy) and authoritarianism or autocratisation (consolidation of the power to govern) (Dall'Agnola, 2024; Glasius and Michaelsen, 2018). This also means we examine the role of the digital in a wide range of sociopolitical environments, ranging from liberal democracies (democratic, but where rights and freedoms are being eroded and accountability is being reduced) to illiberal democracies (putatively democratic, but where liberal freedoms are extensively denied and power is consolidated) to autocracies (undemocratic, but where some liberal freedoms are allowed) to totalitarian dictatorships (undemocratic and demanding unquestioning obedience) – and all shades in between.

What seems clearer than the definition of authoritarianism is that democracy is declining around the globe. The V-Dem Democracy Report (Anguilillo et al., 2025) calculates that in 2024, there were fewer democracies (88) than autocracies (91) for the first time in over 20 years, with 72% of the global population now living in autocratic regimes. Liberal democracies were the least common regime type, with only 29 identified. The growing number of overtly authoritarian state regimes has been coupled with a growth in illiberal and authoritarian practices in many countries

(Glasius, 2018), such as decreasing freedom of expression and a decline in free elections, rule of law, and civil rights, further undermining democracy globally. What is also striking about the current moment is that even in those countries associated with liberal democratic principles, we see a shift toward populism and political polarisation, the dismantling or marketisation of state apparatus, and the reconfiguring of legal systems that realise illiberal tendencies and foreshadow further democratic backsliding. It is further notable that in the contemporary moment – the third wave of autocratisation as Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) label it – this decline is not typically associated with sudden events such as a military coup or an illegal power grab (such as declaring martial law). Rather, it manifests in 'legal disguise', creeping into and eroding the political fabric in ways that make it difficult to recognise when democracy is being subverted (see also Bermeo, 2016). As many of the commentaries illustrate, digital technologies such as social media, consumer and e-governance platforms, and surveillance devices, as well as the co-optation of and partnerships with major digital companies, are central to this autocratic drift. In this way, authoritarian, autocratic, and illiberal practices are able to grow, often in legitimate ways, in otherwise liberal, democratic states.

These qualities are evident in many countries, but have perhaps been most pronounced – or more abruptly visible – in the second term of Trump in the US. Beginning immediately after his inauguration, Trump's regime has been marked by executive aggrandisement (Bermeo, 2016); ignoring of the Constitution and law; dismantling of parts of the federal government and the appointment of Trump loyalists to senior positions; threatening and radically reducing budgets of public institutions; attacking and directly intervening in media, judiciary, and educational institutions; suppressing of freedom of speech/action; deploying of the National Guard and army to repress protests; pardoning of imprisoned supporters; and the challenging of election processes. We have also seen the deliberate dissemination of misleading or patently false information and nationalist and religious rhetoric that has fostered political divisions, created hostile environments for many citizens, and generated a culture of anxiety for critical voices. These acts, serving to consolidate power, come straight out of any authoritarian leader's playbook. Crucially, the digital has been centrally implicated within Trump's strategy and tactics, as he has utilised digital media as channels for dis- and misinformation, sought to dismantle digital state infrastructures that might challenge the regime's rhetoric and actions, and utilised the power, platforms, and resources of American, multinational digital corporations.

In pulling together this issue, we were very keen not to centralise the US experience, though; it is perhaps only notable because this backsliding is happening so overtly and rapidly in a nation that has long promoted itself as the global seat and source of democracy. We also did not want to approach authoritarianism as an emerging or recently returning phenomenon. As Mahvish Ahmad and Rabia Mehmood (2017; see also Akbari and Wood, 2025; Möllers, 2025, this issue) remind us, for much of the Majority World, there has not been a recent 'turn' to authoritarianism. The residual and ongoing effects of European colonialism have long generated political contexts where the '"technologies of authoritarianism" have been actively nurtured' (Ahmad and Mehmood, 2017: 507). In keeping with this understanding, the commentaries in this edition make it clear that there is no one-size-fits-all, universal form of authoritarianism. Instead, a variety of relations exist globally with respect to historical roots, key actors, political ideology, and the relationship to capitalism, colonialism, and the mechanisms of (right wing) populism. These variances across jurisdictions also lead to diverging relationships between the digital and political systems, and this diversity is also reflected in the papers published here.

Digital entanglements

Digital technologies have a long relationship with political systems. Early discourse about digital systems praised their capacity to expand and support democracy by increasing information access and diversity, as well as giving ordinary

citizens spaces to contribute their voices to public and civic systems, serving as a liberation technology (Diamond, 2015). Howard Rheingold's (1994) depiction of the internet as a restored agora or public sphere is iconic here. Today, though, we have a wide range of digital tools, systems, infrastructures, and industries entangled profoundly within the workings of nation states and thus, in the context we have just described, with the increasingly undemocratic politics they enact. But it is not only that digital systems enable already existing authoritarian forms; they actively shape their nature by generating new terrains, targets, and techniques (Schlumberger et al., 2024).

The result is a particular texture in contemporary politics that has been labelled digital authoritarianism (see Pearson, 2024; Roberts and Oosterom, 2024 for various definitions). Here, we define digital authoritarianism as a sociopolitical modality consisting of three intersecting modes: (a) where states and other repressive actors govern *through* digital technologies and systems, using them to surveil, manage, control, and repress populations, both domestic and foreign; (b) where authoritarianism is being enacted *within* digital spaces as various actors seek to influence and control narratives and behaviours across apps and platforms; (c) where state and corporate bodies exert control *over* the regulation of digital systems and their users, and reshape their nature by transforming their governmentalities. In each case, illiberal and autocratic effects arise as intentional acts designed to seize and legitimise power and undermine democratic ideals, and as the unintended and unanticipated consequences of design changes and new regulations that become mainstreamed and normalised (Pearson, 2024). A goal of this special issue is to highlight these intersecting modes and forms of digital authoritarianism and their trajectories.

Some of these entanglements of the digital and the autocratic and illiberal are obvious and direct. For instance, digital media industry tycoon Elon Musk publicly showcased this relationship as he visibly supported and shadowed various illiberal initiatives by the newly re-elected Trump, especially through his co-leadership of DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) that sought to access and gain control of state systems and exert widescale reform of state work, and his ownership and management of social media platform X (formerly Twitter; see Marzouk, 2025, this issue). Of course, he is but one of the many tech oligarchs who, through actions, silence, and/or complicity, have facilitated the various repressive actions of authoritarian regimes around the world. Embedded in narratives of progress and development (Koch, 2025, this issue), high-tech businesses and transnational dynamics are active contributors to the authoritarian drift we recognise today, although the form they take differs across nation-states. For example, in China, the state co-opts and strongly influences the operations and investments of corporations to reproduce state power; while in the US, corporations work to either capture the state or seek to become state-like (e.g. through building/governing new cities and operating infrastructures vital to democracy such as telecommunications and digital networks – see Akbari, 2025, this issue; Wood, 2025, this issue; Yang, 2025, this issue). Generally autocratic by nature, corporations resist democratic interventions, furthering the illiberal qualities of contemporary states as they become central to their operations or as they serve as repressive actors themselves.

The systems built by these elite actors also have their own agency in creating authoritarian spaces. Through technical design, policy decisions, and economic models, various digital systems generate environments that promote the workings of authoritarian politics. Disinformation, deepfakes, algorithmic bias, and automated bots – affordances which have not been adequately addressed by tech industry actors – have all played roles in diminishing democratic processes and the quality of public discourse in a range of countries (García-Orosa, 2021; Maati et al., 2024). We have also seen active campaigns to sow discord and undermine democracy in other jurisdictions (such as the disinformation campaigns by Russia in US elections and the Brexit referendum: Dawson and Innes, 2019; Maréchal, 2017). Threats to disrupt digital infrastructures such as satellites and undersea cables are being used as exertions of transnational and domestic power, as are internet blackouts that prevent citizens connecting

to each other and the wider world (Shewly, 2025, this issue). Digital technologies have also been weaponised to foment hate against often already marginalised groups, serving illiberal political agendas even when not formally directed by that programme (Pearson, 2024). These trends have been aided in democratic states by the weakening of traditional media and its role as the vital fourth estate protecting democracy and resisting dictatorship and authoritarianism. At the same time, in already authoritarian regimes (and those tending in this direction), control of traditional and online media is being expanded, redefining certain kinds of content and limiting access and participation through technical, policy, judicial, and cultural means – often simultaneously.

In other instances, though, the relationship between authoritarianism and the digital is more subtle. Key is the growth of state and corporate surveillance capacities through the datafication processes of online systems, but also in the development of increasingly nuanced biometric capture technologies that permeate civic, social, and cultural infrastructures (e.g. Prouse, 2025, this issue; Ruppert and Bork-Hüffer, 2025, this issue). Citizens can be directly monitored as they interact with digital interfaces in order to, for instance, claim benefits, secure employment, access healthcare, or engage in political debate. They are also exposed to monitoring through the digital traces they leave behind in all online interactions, including those that are personal and intimate. This dataveillance is conducted both by corporations and states, often in concert, and functions at an indexical scale of granularity (uniquely identifiable) that enables an illiberal invasion of privacy and the monitoring of populations that sustains authoritarian regimes (Schlumberger et al., 2024). Thus, while states have long used surveillance as a tool of social control – the 111 kilometres of physical files from the former East Germany in the Stasi Records Archive are an example – contemporary digital systems have intensified and extensified this capacity (Xu, 2020). It must also be remembered that illiberal politics often target minority groups who are constructed as threats to public order, creating uneven exposure to the impacts of digital control systems, especially surveillance and policing (Dall'Agnola, 2024; e.g. Cahane, 2025, this issue; Everhart and Davenport, 2025, this issue). In these ways, the expansion of dataveillance super-charges the political landscape, embedding regimes of control throughout the social fabric.

Aligned here is also the (state-sanctioned) growth in AI technologies, which have automated surveillance and data interpretation, and added additional layers of digital interventions to the policing and control of citizens. Algorithmic calculations create digital doppelgangers of individuals based on datafied inputs and assumptions, enabling preemptive policing and other interventions by ascribing intentions and actions to individuals (Benjamin, 2019; Eubanks, 2017). This can be coupled with facial recognition technologies to better enable the management of dissent and facilitate 'targeted, preventive repression' rather than generalised oppression (Xu, 2020: 310). In both the war in Ukraine and in the genocide in Gaza, we have already seen authoritarian states using these systems embedded in armed, semi-automated drones to target and kill in pursuit of authoritarian agendas (Reichert, 2025, this issue). The digital here becomes a direct weapon of state violence, but can also indirectly enact violence through the chilling effects of this kind of saturated, automated surveillance.

Despite all of these justifiable concerns with respect to how the digital is enabling autocratisation and the erosion of democracy, we must return to some of Rheingold's optimism. Even in a context where digital systems are deeply integrated into authoritarian regimes and illiberal agendas, they can still serve as vital tools for the organising of resistance against authoritarian incursions into social and economic liberties. These do not have to focus on the over-turning of regimes as we saw in Malaysia (Cheong, 2025, this issue) and during the Arab Spring (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013), although these instances are important. Resistance to authoritarianism may also take the form of small-scale interventions that create spaces for democracy, agency, and human dignity. News updates, information about personal and collective safety, and documented examples of state and corporate violence

can be shared through encrypted digital systems, while protests, street demonstrations, and direct interventions against authoritarian acts are instigated and promoted through digital platforms. Solidarity messages created and shared online sustain individuals and generate oppositional collectives as they navigate an increasingly perilous sociopolitical landscape. Various papers in this edition speak of resistance to and through digital systems that may work to rebuild democracy and liberalism at various scales – or are already doing so (e.g. Gladden, 2025, this issue; Singha and Ghosh, 2025, this issue; Zafer Teoman, 2025, this issue). In these stories, and many others like them, we may find solutions to the expanding threat posed by digital authoritarianism and, in that, the hope that we need to oppose it.

In this issue

When we issued the call for papers for this special issue, we were overwhelmed with the response. Although we offered only a short window for submission, we received 180 abstracts from around the world. On the one hand, this was an embarrassment of riches from which to generate an edition; on the other hand, it was an indictment of the state of politics on our planet. We selected the papers to publish from this broad and excellent selection with a view to diversity in both theme and geography, attempting to capture varied perspectives and positions, as well as the unique illiberal and authoritarian contexts in which the digital is an important player. The end result is 48 papers referencing almost 30 different countries and reflecting diverse disciplinary orientations.

We begin with Norma Möllers reminding us that the bureaucratic and calculative technologies of 'technofascism' are not exceptional but are central to statecraft, both contemporary and historical. Natalie Koch goes on to highlight the emphasis on digital technologies in current ideas of economic growth and how that foregrounding articulates authoritarian agendas, focusing on Saudi Arabia and the US. Grace Yang then takes us to China, where the government's apparently paradoxical push to develop open-source AI is interpreted as a form of global expansion. Our view of digital infrastructures' role is then added to by Jung-ying Chang, Wen-I Li, and Ayona Datta's examination of Taiwan's "silicon shield" as both a defence against encroaching authoritarianism from outside its territory and also a producer of authoritarian effects within the country.

We then move further into case studies of digital authoritarianism with Margot Francois exploring the Cuban environment, emphasising how each geopolitical context produces unique versions of governance. This is followed by Mergen Dyussenov, who interrogates the contradictory nature of e-governance initiatives in Kazakhstan, exploring how they both aid development and embed control and surveillance. Similarly, Jess Reia describes how smart infrastructures in Brazil further democratic decline, while Niloufar Vadiati and Nassim Mehran critique the specific nature of urban 'smartification' in the Iranian context. Jasmin Dall'agnola reminds us, though, that in order to understand these authoritarian smart cities, we also need to examine them from below, emphasising their human dimensions and exploring how people engage with or adapt them to their own ends. Oksana Zaporozhets and Liubov Chernysheva actualise such an analysis by exploring how practices of neighbouring in Russia are entangled with e-governance and smart initiatives, serving to both reproduce and challenge power.

The discussion of how authoritarianism is realised through articulations of digital technologies then continues with Austin Kocher's analysis of the transformation of CBP One – an app designed to support asylum seekers in the US – into a tool for deportation. Eamon Costello and Stephen Gow then explore the impact of generative AI in education and how this may be reducing the conditions for effective participation in democratic processes. But it is not only through the technology itself that authoritarian power is consolidated. In her exploration of the weaponising of cyberdefamation laws in Cameroon, Amber Murrey reminds us that legal systems are also central to how digital politics are realised in practice. Similarly, Rae Baker brings our attention to procurement systems and the need for legislative and civil oversight over the kinds of

digital policing technologies being purchased by state actors.

The role of digital corporations and financial capitalism is also a key theme of the edition. Azadeh Akbari pinpoints how Big Tech firms actively develop authoritarian spaces, sometimes in collaboration with regimes, but always as part of their ideological vision. David Murakami Wood returns us to smart cities, but this time a corporate vision of the Praxis Network State centred on libertarian principles and authoritarian ideas. We then explore the nexus between authoritarian rulers and technology by examining the investment of US President Donald Trump in crypto finance initiatives in Chris Muellereile's paper, while Gustavo Robles and Jorge Orovitz Sanmartino analyse various Latin American initiatives involving Bitcoin and AI that highlight the relationships between corporations and autocratic power. Amr Marzouk explores the illiberal transformation of social media platform Twitter and the increasing power of its owner, Elon Musk, serving as an additional example of this nexus. Digital labour platforms are then brought into view by Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and colleagues, who report on how these labour-brokers also serve as ideological technologies, transforming political subjectivity.

Given its centrality to authoritarian systems, it is no surprise that we also have a number of papers exploring digital surveillance. Liz Calhoun focuses on the role of privatised AI-powered analytics in expanding the surveillance capacities of social media. Lukas Hess, Reta Barfuss, and Lorenz Naegeli critique the deployment of similar technologies – described as mercenary spyware – against activists in Europe. The intersection of policy, discourse, and technological surveillance systems in the context of anti-LGBTQ panic is examined by Christoffer Koch Andersen, while Amir Cahane explores the growing intensity and extensity of surveillance of Arab-Israelis within Israel under the guise of anti-terrorism rhetoric.

Ramón Reichert continues the exploration of Israel, extending the analysis to include the integrated use of weaponised, (semi-)autonomous drones within the architecture of the ongoing genocidal war in Gaza, blurring boundaries between military action and surveillance. The theme of authoritarian warfare is also picked up by Linda Ruppert and Tavea Bork-Hüffer, who consider how biotechnologies are extending the human body in the service of war politics. Questions of the incursion of authoritarian politics into bodies are also picked up by Carolyn Prouse, who critiques the datafication of disease and health information as surveillance, but also how this is coupled with AI to produce predictive systems that can become systems of control.

Controlling the technology is not enough, though. For authoritarian governance to function effectively also requires control over discourse and meaning, as it is in these arenas that its politics are rendered acceptable. How digital authoritarianism is authorised by public debates about technology is the focus of Shubhangi Heda and Giovana Fleck's paper, while Azry Kaloko looks at how Indonesian moral codes are embedded within regulatory environments governing digital spaces in that country. Dechun Zhang describes how the Chinese government leverages nationalist propaganda within everyday participatory environments, and Ali Saha describes how casteism is embedded within – but also challenged through – social media in India. The transnational flows of political discourse through social media – in this instance from the US to Iran – is the focus of Solange Muñoz, Sarah Farahpoor, and Milad Mohebi's paper.

But central to these effects is how digitised discursive spaces are actively manipulated by actors seeking to consolidate power. Huw Dylan and Elena Grossfeld explore how Russian disinformation networks reshape social memory through the manipulation of Large Language Models, while Giovanni Francischelli explores the digitally distributed and promoted documentary films of Brasil Paralelo and their role in promoting conservative ideology. Avery Everhart and Theodore Davenport examine the weaponising of anti-trans rhetoric by far-Right actors in the US. However, these manipulations only work with the consent of the governed and, as Dawn Gilpin and Lance Gharavi describe, in interactive digital environments this may also include their participation. This concern is also

raised by Brooklyne Gipson, who documents how algorithmic micro-targeting is used to encourage marginalised groups to spread content that works against their interests.

The particular affordances of digital systems are also implicated in authoritarianism for how they reshape our capacity for action and for self-making. Danny Steur and Jeroen Oomen explore the visual economy of the Gaza genocide and how digitisation has changed visual practice in ways that render atrocity acceptable or inevitable. How the constant streams of social media shape our subjectivity so that we become more amenable to authoritarianism is the focus of Maia Almeida-Amir's paper, while Emerson Johnston examines how the affordances and governance protocols of digital platforms police and structure the possible subject positions we can occupy. Ian Spangler and colleagues examine the role of quantification within authoritarian systems, considering the use of counter-data as a mechanism for subverting this technologised governance system. A slightly different argument is made by Patrick McCurdy and Guilluame Thibault-Rochefort, who propose instead a counter-flux insurgency to challenge the infrastructures of surveillance and prediction by destabilising their reflexive systemic logics.

Finally, we turn our attention to acts of protest and resistance. Hosna Shewly examines the internet shutdown during a political uprising in Bangladesh in July 2024, highlighting the fracturing of space-time associated with these acts by the state, but also as protestors recomposed their struggle in response. Benazir Bona Pratamawaty also documents the push and pull of social media activism in the context of the Indonesian government's attempts to curtail online civic spaces. Similarly, Dhiraj Singha and Raina Ghosh explore the quiet, hidden acts of subversion taking place in India as the digital environment has become increasingly hostile to protest. Drawing on ethnographic research with Turkish student protestors, Kıvılcım Zafer Teoman examines how the construction of collective memory through social media is serving as a strategy of resistance and for building spaces of belonging that counter authoritarian trajectories. Resistance to the eradication of shared memory is also central to Shonda Nicole Gladden's paper, in which she proposes ethno-curatorial rememory – embodied curation through rituals, art, and storytelling – as a form of activism against algorithmic authoritarianism. The final paper of this issue by Niki Cheong brings us firmly back to the framework of hope as he reminds us of the successful creative deployment of internet technologies in Malaysia that ruptured the authoritarian hold of an incumbent government and enhanced democracy in the country ever since. This is an important reminder that, despite the host of negative effects of digital authoritarianism documented in this issue, there is always the potential for these same tools to become part of democratic renewal.

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