How Technology Changed the Game on Democratic Development

Jeremy Weinstein

PANEL 1:

The End of the End of History? The Rise and Fall of Democracy as a Dominant Developmental Paradigm

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE:

"The Autocratic Challenge to Liberal Democracy and the Future of Global Development: The World 20 Years After the Founding of CDDRL" was a one-day workshop examining the state of democracy and development today held on November 4, 2022, in celebration of CDDRL's 20th anniversary.

The workshop brought together current and former CDDRL scholars to understand the causes and consequences of these global challenges, and to advance a research agenda that can underpin an era of democratic renewal.

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A Memo Prepared for CDDRL’s 20th Anniversary Conference

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When CDDRL launched in 2002, Google was only four years old, had raised just north of $25m in venture capital in a recent round, and had not yet gone public. It was two years before Facebook incorporated, and four before Twitter would appear. People were using mobile phones, especially in advanced economies, but the arrival of the first major smartphone, the iPhone, was still five years away. And most of the services built on these platforms—services which have transformed the way human beings access information, communicate with one another, pay for services, organize their labor, buy products, conduct meetings, learn in school, and do pretty much everything else—were yet to be invented.

At that moment, one could not have anticipated the ways in which technological change might figure in the 21st century’s story of democratic development. It was a moment of democratic expansion, with the third wave giving way to the fourth. And though there were warning signs, especially in the Global South where young democracies were struggling, scholars were rightly focused on understanding the causes of democratization and the conditions under which democracies consolidated. The drivers of democratic change were being intensely debated—the role of elites and pacting, social mobilization, the relationship between development and democracy, the importance of institutional design, the impact of the international context—but technology was barely on the agenda.

Now, looking back, we cannot tell the story of democracy in the 21st century without attention to the role of technological change. Moreover, I would argue that the possibilities for democracy looking ahead will depend in critical ways on two factors: (1) how democratic institutions navigate and address some of the unique challenges that technology presents to the health of the democratic project and (2) how democracies act collectively to ensure that further technological advances, many of which will originate in the innovation-rich advanced democracies, don’t tip the scales in favor of autocracy globally.

Technology as a Liberating Force

The early internet enthusiasts saw their project as inherently liberatory. Famously, John Perry Barlow issued a “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” in 1996, challenging governments of all stripes (“you weary giants of flesh and steel”) to leave the new citizens of cyberspace alone as the internet’s founders were “creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth.” Inherent in this utopian ideal was the idea that the Internet would empower individuals, enable communication and mobilization, and strengthen the hands of citizens vis-à-vis traditional holders of power, including states and companies. Over time, a view emerged that new forms of digital ICT—so-called “liberation technology”—could play a central role in expanding political, social, and economic freedom. Two key elements of these new forms of technology were seen as
fundamentally pro-democratic: their decentralized character, in contrast to traditional forms of media and information-sharing, and the ability of any individuals, groups, etc. to engage in both two-way and one-to-many communication quickly and cheaply.

This perspective that technology was fundamentally liberalizing also became the zeitgeist in Washington, DC. This is important because international context matters: as the global leader of the democratic project, as well as the home of emerging technology companies, the U.S. was in a position to shape how these new technologies rolled out in the world. The domestic strategy was clear: build a regulatory oasis around technology companies so that they could fully pave the path of the information superhighway. This is what Al Gore meant when he says he “invented the internet!” A wild west in data collection and brokering, the absence of legal liability for content on platforms, authorization to commercialize the internet, etc. – these were the regulatory choices Washington made.

And when it came to foreign policy, the United States stood for internet freedom. As Secretary Clinton said in a major speech in 2010, “We stand for a single internet where all of humanity has equal access to knowledge and ideas.” What did pursuing internet freedom in practice mean? First, it involved advancing the normative claim that citizens are entitled to the same rights online that they should benefit from offline. So, for example, if freedom of expression is first among the basic freedoms to which people are entitled, users should be guaranteed that freedom online as well. Second, it included significant, concrete efforts to expand internet access in places without democracy or political freedom with the intentional goal of bringing about political change.

Less than a year after this speech, the Arab Spring unfolded, buoying the hopes of internet enthusiasts that technological change was a game-changer in the long-running battle between citizens and elites. The one region that had not experienced democratization was now under pressure, and Twitter, Facebook, smartphones, and the internet appeared to be critical tools of political and social mobilization.

Technology as a Destructive Force

In retrospect, this agenda sounds deeply naïve. And there were healthy skeptics at the time who warned that authoritarian states could build, use, and spread technologies that would censor speech, filter information, and enable even greater repression. Their warnings proved prescient, but perhaps insufficient. Because ultimately, the concerns about the impact of technology on democracy’s prospects were both about what technology would do to democracy itself and how it might empower authoritarian regimes.

The growth of the internet and digital technologies has generated challenges for the democratic project in many ways—from the rise of algorithmic decision-making and the erosion of privacy, to the concentration of economic power and the threat to human well-being posed by automation. But perhaps the central issue that democracies must confront around new technologies is around the governance of private platforms: how to navigate a commitment to free speech, the desire to protect individual dignity, and the essential need for a healthy information ecosystem that enables reasoned exchange and deliberation. The questions of what content platforms host, what
they take down, and who, if anyone, is responsible for these choices, are now some of the most vexing issues that democracies confront. What’s at stake is nothing more than the health of the public sphere. Because an information environment full of misinformation and disinformation stands in the way of the collective deliberation that democracies must carry out. And platforms that enable people to target, bully, and harass both individuals and groups, in ways that come perilously close to the line of mobilizing offline violence, risk an extraordinary backlash against free speech.

A decade ago, those who foresaw that technology would be a mixed blessing were less focused on the implications for democracies and more attentive to the “dual uses” of new technologies. They were right to point out that, as with any technology, leaders would seek to use those technologies to their own benefit. And for authoritarian regimes this meant using technology to do the things that authoritarians always do—finding that balance between cooptation and repression that keeps themselves in power. There are countless examples of the ways in which digital technologies are facilitating this age-old work of maintaining control over a population: algorithms that crawl social media for signs of opposition activity, facial recognition technologies that track behavior in real-time, decentralized mechanisms of communication and engagement that can be surveilled, ever-more powerful tools to shape the information environment, including through censorship and filtering.

Importantly, authoritarians haven’t stopped at their borders. The second decade of these new technologies has been one in which we’ve come to understand “digital authoritarianism” as a feature of international politics as well. This refers to the strategic efforts of China, Russia, Iran and others to develop and export tech-driven strategies for authoritarian rule. China pioneered digital censorship and has exported surveillance and monitoring systems to at least 18 countries. Russia has been a leader in weaponizing information technologies as a key tool of targeted influence operations, including in the United States. At this point, it’s no longer a question of whether new technologies will be harnessed to help authoritarian leaders stay in power; instead, it’s a deliberate strategy of autocracies to help one another by selling products and services and sharing strategies and tactics. As the design and production of these new technologies has globalized, the ability even of Silicon Valley companies to prevent nefarious use has dramatically weakened. For most products now, there is an alternative supplier.

Navigating Technology and Our Democratic Future

Looking back at the past twenty years, technology may not have been a game-changer for democratic development. Ultimately the digital products and services of the 21st century are tools, just as the technological innovations that preceded them. They can be used to advance the democratic project or to repel it. As Larry Diamond wrote in 2010, when he warned about an overly optimistic view of technology, it is “[ultimately] political organization and strategy and deep-rooted normative, social, and economic forces will determine who “wins” the race.”

But, perhaps in ways that surprised us, technology did become an important (even essential) part of the story. And how we navigate technology at home and abroad will shape the prospects for democracy going forward.
This begins with the question of how the world’s leading democracies will govern technology at home. Will governments continue to defer to the CEOs of technology companies or will democratic institutions step up to the plate and begin to referee some of the essential value trade-offs we confront with new technologies? Elon Musk’s purchase of Twitter portends a continuing period of corporate decision-making on content moderation far from democratic accountability. Moreover, the response to the Facebook papers – one year on – has been a yawn from Washington (if we measure success by pieces of legislation passed) and a deliberate effort by tech companies in Silicon Valley to eliminate or silence the units that might blow the whistle on technology’s harmful effects. There’s no uncertainty about the critical issues that we need the regulatory state to address—privacy, algorithmic discrimination, antitrust, content moderation, and automation would be good places to start. But only in Europe do we see democratic institutions seizing the opportunity to rebalance the relationship between the state and the private sector in technology. The ability of the U.S. to withstand the destructive consequences of technological change—and to shape what happens internationally on this front—will depend on whether politicians can break through the logjam that currently stands in the way of legislative action.

Internationally, the pressure is on to forge a common global agenda across democracies on how to regulate technology going forward. The naïveté of the internet freedom agenda has been replaced by a more nuanced policy framework—one reflected in the Alliance for the Future of the Internet, launched by the Biden Administration in 2022 with more than 60 partners around the globe. The declaration of this group recognizes the need for governmental action in a wide variety of domains—from protecting privacy, to balancing free speech against the need to reduce illegal and harmful content, to fostering greater competition. The line that must be carefully walked is one that delineates the areas in which democratic action to set guardrails around technology are consistent with international human rights principles versus those efforts to control the internet that are rights-abusing and ultimately strengthen the hands of authoritarian leaders. It’s a tricky balance, especially in a world in which notionally democratic states, such as India, are using these tools to surveil the opposition and silence dissent.

Long term, the technologies of the moment will be replaced by something we can’t yet imagine, whether it emerges from advances in generalized artificial intelligence or bioengineering. If we don’t want technologies to undermine the democratic project, we’ll need to be far more deliberate in developing a compelling democratic model of digital governance which continues to foster innovation, while demonstrating how to mitigate the harmful consequences of technologies. The major investments in AI and scientific research authorized by Congress are an important step in this direction. At the same time, we’ll need to be far more attentive to (a) our dependence for various inputs/components on authoritarian regimes and (b) the potential misuse of new technologies for harmful purposes, both by foreign governments acting at home and internationally. This means continuing to think seriously about supply chains, how to we build our resilience, and the role of market access and export controls in managing the diffusion of new technologies around the globe.
Since 2002, the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) at Stanford University has collaborated widely with academics, policymakers and practitioners around the world to advance knowledge about the conditions for and interactions among democracy, broad-based economic development, human rights, and the rule of law.

CDDRL bridges the worlds of scholarship and practice to understand and foster the conditions for effective representative governance, promote balanced and sustainable economic growth, and establish the rule of law. Our faculty, researchers, and students analyze the ways in which democracy and development are challenged by authoritarian resurgence, misinformation, and the perils of a changing climate.

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