

Chinese-style 'digital authoritarianism' grows globally: study

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Governments worldwide are stepping up use of online tools, in many cases inspired by China's model, to suppress dissent and tighten their

grip on power, a human rights watchdog study found Thursday.

The annual Freedom House study of 65 countries found global internet [freedom](#) declined for the eighth consecutive year in 2018, amid a rise in what the group called "digital authoritarianism."

The Freedom on the Net 2018 report found online propaganda and disinformation have increasingly "poisoned" the digital space, while the unbridled collection of personal data is infringing on privacy.

"Democracies are struggling in the digital age, while China is exporting its model of censorship and surveillance to control information both inside and outside its borders," said Michael Abramowitz, president of Freedom House.

"This pattern poses a threat to the open internet and endangers prospects for greater democracy worldwide."

Chinese officials have held sessions on controlling information with 36 of the 65 countries assessed, and provided telecom and surveillance equipment to a number of foreign governments, Freedom House said.

The accusations made by Freedom House are "without basis, unprofessional, irresponsible, and have ulterior motives," said Chinese foreign ministry official spokesman Lu Kang at a regular press briefing in Beijing on Thursday.

Cyberspace is complex, he added, and requires "the global community, including governments, businesses, think tanks and media to adopt a constructive attitude to maintain it."

The report found 17 governments approved or proposed laws restricting online media in the name of fighting "fake news," while 18 countries

increased surveillance or weakened encryption protection to more closely monitor their citizenry.

According to the researchers, internet freedom declined in 26 countries from June 2017 to May 2018. Gains were seen in 19 countries, most of them minor.

China's 'techno-dystopia'

One of the greatest threats, Freedom House said, is efforts by China to remake the digital world in its "techno-dystopian" image.

It cited a sweeping Chinese cybersecurity requirement that local and foreign companies "immediately stop transmission" of banned content, and compels them to ensure that data on Chinese users is hosted within the country.

This has been followed by "hundreds" of new directives on what people can and cannot do online, and tighter controls on the use of VPNs to evade detection.

The report said leaked documents and other evidence suggest as many as a million Muslims may be held in internment camps in Xinjiang, many as a result of nonviolent online activities.

China appears to be using its big tech firms involved in telecom infrastructure to extend its dominance and gain an edge in surveillance, according to Freedom House.

Companies such as Huawei—largely banned from contracts in the US and Australia—are building infrastructure in many parts of the world including Africa and Latin America, according to Freedom House board chairman Michael Chertoff, a former US secretary of homeland

security.

"This opens up a potential for exploiting information in these countries by having technological backdoors that can be used by the Chinese government to collect intelligence," Chertoff said.

Suppressing dissent

The researchers said online freedom is facing threats in democratic and authoritarian states.

India led the world in the number of internet shutdowns, with over 100 reported incidents in 2018 so far, claiming that the moves were needed to halt the flow of disinformation and incitement to violence.

Similar actions were taken in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

"Cutting off internet service is a draconian response, particularly at a time when citizens may need it the most, whether to dispel rumors, check in with loved ones, or avoid dangerous areas," Freedom House researcher Adrian Shahbaz said.

"While deliberately falsified content is a genuine problem, some governments are increasingly using 'fake news' as a pretense to consolidate their control over information and suppress dissent."

Shahbaz said more governments, including Saudi Arabia, are employing "troll armies" to manipulate social media and in many cases drown out the voices of dissidents.

"It has now become a tool of authoritarian diplomacy to deploy an army of electronic trolls," he said.

The researchers said online freedom also declined in the United States in part due to the rollback of "net neutrality" rules which ensured that all data be treated equally, without "fast" or "slow" lanes for commercial or other reasons.

It said online freedom also faces threats in the US as a result of the reauthorization of a surveillance law and a "hyperpartisan" environment in social media marked by large disinformation efforts.

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