Jason Gordon   **21 April 2023**

Has the Internet been a net positive or negative for democracy around the world?

Since its inception, the Internet has had a profound impact on the world's geopolitics. From democracies to dictatorships, the Internet has simultaneously allowed everyone to connect with each other and opened various tools for states to further surveil their citizens. These tools can give dictatorships more power if they can use them, and the mass connection of the Internet can allow populists to gain power easily. Thus, the Internet has generally been a net negative for worldwide democracy. Technology can be used against democratization by authoritarians, and the Internet allows whoever speaks the loudest to gain power.

Populist candidates want to garner parasocial relationships so they can gain loyal voters. The Internet is ideal for this, and populists use this to their advantage.[1] For instance, Narendra Modi and his party, the BJP, used the Internet to create messages specifically focused on Modi's personal life, allowing voters to connect with his story and become loyal to him rather than a party.[2] Other parties did not follow this strategy and were unable to form as strong of relationships with voters because of it. Modi also used social media to create trends and push his name recognition. As a candidate reaches more voters, they gain more power, and Modi used this successfully. One way he did this was by creating the idea of a "selfie with Modi," pushing filters and apps that allowed you to take a picture with Modi, which only furthered his name recognition.[3] Finally, Modi worked to craft a dual identity of both a strong leader and a commoner, using social media to assist him in having voters both relate to him and see him as powerful.[4] All of these tactics were used to bring a populist to power, allowing the BJP to gain a

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[1] 22 March 2023 Lecture, Slide 20.
[2] *Making of Selfie Nationalism*, 168.
[3] 22 March 2023 Lecture, Slides 22-3.
[4] *Making of Selfie Nationalism*, 174-5.

massive amount of votes nationwide and electing Modi to the Prime Minister position. It allowed Indians to relate to Modi, no matter his policies, and gave him a large amount of power to shape one of the largest countries to his will. Thus, the Internet is a dangerous tool for democracies, as it provides a set of tools populists can exploit, giving them a massive amount of power.

In dictatorships, the Internet is incredibly powerful if governments can use it properly. It allows dictatorships to provide for the citizens and silence dissenters. One of the major issues that plague authoritarians is that they use the threat of violence to stop revolts and cannot easily source feedback from their citizens.[5] The citizens live in fear of the government, so the government cannot know what its citizens want. However, the Internet solves this problem by giving authoritarians a tool to get feedback. For instance, the city of Moscow was able to use an application called "Our City" to identify an issue with its roads and then used that same app to find where the roads were damaged and fix them.[6] Moscow was able to solve a massive issue, preventing revolt and providing its citizens with a positive result. Thus, the authoritarian regime became more stable. Moreover, Russia — and other authoritarian nations — can use surveillance to control the Internet and their citizens. Through the Internet's nodes, its applications, and the networks the Internet runs on, authoritarians can wrest control of the Internet to their advantage. Russia uses all three. They forcefully install monitoring applications on devices, use a program known as SORM to control the networks, and buy out popular Russian applications to control the servers.[7] Thus, Russia can control its citizens' Internet access on every level, and other authoritarian governments do the same. China is one of the most technically capable authoritarian regimes, and it uses mass blocking and surveillance to ensure its stability as well.[8]

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[5] 15 March 2023 Lecture, Slide 7.
[6] 15 March 2023 Lecture, Slides 8-10.
[7] 13 March 2023 Lecture, Slides 12-38.
[8] 15 March 2023 Lecture, Slides 12-17.

Thus, authoritarians use the Internet to ensure their stability, preventing democracy from rising in these nations.

Therefore, the Internet has overall been a net negative for democracy. It allows populists to more easily gain support and power in democracies and allows authoritarians to secure their control and surveil their citizens. By using the Internet, candidates can push to make parasocial relationships with their citizens and enforce loyalty to them specifically, rather than to a specific set of policies. This is dangerous for democracies, as it can be exploited by populists with authoritarian tendencies. Moreover, the Internet solves the dictator's information problem and lowers the chance of citizens revolting. They also can surveil their citizens much more directly, as nations like Russia and China have done.