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**WORLD: Is a democratic approach to digital surveillance possible?**

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**Dr. Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy, for Human Rights Without Frontiers**

HRWF (03.07.2022) – Technology and innovation are central pillars of the interconnected and rapidly changing world we live in today. Technological know-how and foreign policy are

closely intertwined, which, with an [authoritarian advance](#) in the world, has presented serious governance challenges on a global scale.

Industrial and technology standards form the set of rules that sustain the marketplace and are critical to international trade. Whoever shapes industrial norms and standards for telecommunications, electricity transmission and artificial intelligence (AI) is in a position to lead. Authoritarian governments are now challenging existing rules, with new norms and standards for a new generation of technologies dependent on 5G networks.

5G is expected to bring greater connectivity, but this has come at the cost of increased security risks, with tools to exploit vulnerabilities available to any adversary. Citizens across the world are concerned about their digital identity and the security of their data. The implications for human rights worldwide are clear and far-reaching. The question whether a democratic approach to digital surveillance can be secured in the face of the authoritarian advance and the technology-empowered 'efficiency' of authoritarianism, is a timely one to address.

### ***Surveillance and authoritarianism***

The development of [digital surveillance](#) has intersected with a global authoritarian advance, which has presented growing challenges to the democratic process and rule of law. Threats from authoritarian states like Iran, North Korea, China and Russia have been on the rise, while the leverage of

democracies to counter undue influence has been decreasing.

An increasing number of players have resorted to [weaponizing trade](#) and information in order to undermine fundamental freedoms. Digital surveillance enables for data, information or communication to be detected, monitored, preserved, transmitted – and also exploited. It enables those in charge to derive value from public data that helps serve their interests at the expense of others. Advances in technology and social media have increased the power of states and multinationals to carry out digital surveillance, while public trust in government has declined.

The contours of a digital authoritarian model are increasingly visible. Facial recognition and AI are here to stay – and improve authoritarian regimes' abilities for control. [China](#), in this regard, has been leading the way, further emboldened by the pandemic to expand its use of digital technologies in the name of public health and safety. President Xi Jinping, wants to use AI's analytical power to push China to the [cutting edge of surveillance](#).

### ***China's authoritarian model***

There are two critical assets to AI, namely data and computer science, and engineering data. China is [abundant](#) with both; it has a large population which facilitates the use of big data and has a rich supply of high-quality computer scientists and engineers. As such, China is set to lead in AI in terms of technological development and market applications, catching up with global leaders, benefiting from a unique technological,

market and policy environment. The Chinese leadership wants China to achieve [AI supremacy by 2030](#).

Through policies, such as [Made in China 2025](#), or the [Next Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan](#), the leadership is sending a message to all relevant stakeholders, including investors, that the government backs AI and is therefore worth investing in it. China's most [prominent](#) AI companies, including CloudWalk, Megvii, Hikvision, iFlytek have been willing partners of the government, helping test its digital surveillance model on minorities, in particular the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

At the same time, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is suspicious of religion, intolerant of [minorities](#), sensitive to [criticism](#) and brutal in its response to any sign of [dissent](#). In addition to widespread and systematic policies of mass detention, torture and cultural persecution, the CCP has used state-of-the-art surveillance technology in [Xinjiang](#), to control over one million Uyghur Muslims and other Turkic ethnic minorities through forced labor and 'reeducation' camps, after having surveilled them for years with the help of invasive digital means. When it comes to advancing national interests, investing in AI has therefore proved to be an 'efficient' tool for the CCP.

## ***Beyond China***

Seen in the context of China's [ambition](#) to "comprehensively construct a moderately prosperous society", AI has served as a tool for the Chinese leadership to advance its core interests,

and possibly play “an irreplaceable role in effectively maintaining social stability”. Beijing is seeking to set new norms in digital rights and privacy while at the same time suppressing dissent at home, and exporting Chinese technological solutions abroad. This will result in a growing acceptance of mass surveillance, and sheds light on an urgent need for democratic governments to be vigilant in setting standards.

The implications of Beijing’s AI expertise therefore go beyond China’s borders. The surveillance system in place in Xinjiang could be extended into the rest of China and then exported beyond the country’s borders. In fact, CETC, the state-owned company that built most of Xinjiang’s surveillance system, has pilot projects in Zhejiang and Guangdong, [laying](#) “a robust foundation for a nationwide rollout”.

Through its massive infrastructure project and top policy priority, the [Belt and Road Initiative](#), China has sought to connect its market globally via both physical and digital infrastructure construction. Through the [Digital Silk Road](#) introduced in 2015, BRI has also served as an avenue to export China’s its digital surveillance and promote the CCP’s geostrategic goals, while shifting the balance of power between the individual and the state on a global scale. Beijing wants its companies to participate in building financial, information and telecommunications networks globally, and thus support China’s capacity to participate in technology standards setting.

### ***Tracking and tracing***

Democratic governments, such as [South Korea](#) or [Taiwan](#), have used advanced track and trace methods to control the spread of COVID, which has proved to be done transparently, in a way compatible with democratic measures. Taiwan used a QR code-based system, introduced by Digital Minister Audrey Tang, to support its contact tracing; over two million businesses around the country made the code available to customers who would scan the code and text 1922 for free upon entering shops, which has allowed authorities to retrace a person's movements. According to Taiwan's [Central Epidemic Command Centre](#) (CECC), the authorities investigated six million potential contacts.

In contrast, the Chinese government used the opportunity to [promote](#) its 'best practice' model of authoritarian governance abroad, including widespread digitized contract tracing through cutting-edge experimentation with data analytics and AI tools. Beijing has also engaged in an [information offensive](#), a mix of overt and covert operations designed to spread disinformation, discredit democratic governments' response and improve China's image abroad.

### ***Toward digital democracy***

The risk of an AI-powered authoritarian bloc at the expense of democracy is real. Against the backdrop of the rivalry between democracies and authoritarian regimes competing for standards and ideas, as well as for power and influence, democratic governments must lead by example to ensure that rule of law, democracy and human rights are not undermined in the new digital era.

In the words of Taiwan's Digital Minister, Audrey Tang, [digital democracy](#) has proven to be the most effective solution in the face of global challenges; Taiwan has set an example with its model of "people-public-private partnership", and has [managed](#) to combat the pandemic with no lockdowns and the 'infodemic' with no takedowns.

Taiwan has shown that a democratic approach to digital surveillance can be secured in the face of the authoritarian advance. "Democracy in Taiwan isn't just for the people, but with the people". Minister Tang's [statement](#) should serve as inspiration to democracies as they fight against disinformation and seek to counter authoritarian digital surveillance.

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