

Connectivity and Exploitation in the Digital Age

Written by Clare Stevens and Andreas Haggman

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CLARE STEVENS AND ANDREAS HAGGMAN, MAY 19 2022

This feature is part of the online resources to accompany the textbook *Foundations of International Relations*.

When we think of humanity we do not typically think of a single, homogenous, peaceful body. Instead, the global system comprises of a number of distinct factions competing, coercing and cooperating to achieve their own end goals. These may be groupings formed along ethnic, cultural or religious lines or they may be nation-states. Importantly, however, none of these groupings exist independently of the individual humans within them. Humanity consists not only of bodies, but also of the ideas contained within human minds. Central to the concept of connectivity is the ability to communicate with others, which we do more and more today via digital means – and at an intensity unmatched historically. The internet has put almost every individual within reach of each other in the sense that they can communicate instantly for leisure or even political purposes. Yet, it has also allowed criminals and state actors new avenues to operate. In this sense, our ever more connected world is simultaneously one of greater opportunity, but also one of greater risk.

Connectivity has taken many forms throughout history, most notably through trade and diplomacy, which typically moved slowly on horseback and over the sea until the invention of ever faster forms of transit that gradually shrunk the sense of distance between people through the twentieth century. However, this physical shrinking of space is nothing when compared to the advances in information technology that moves information at the speed of light. The devices and digital services that bring us together today are also the source of dangers and divisions because the internet is an ambivalent technology that can be put to diverse uses. It can support, undermine or exacerbate any pre-existing social relations, depending on the context and actors involved. These uses can be empowering, but these effects can also be unforeseen, or even dangerous. In the era of digital connectivity, old human activities are finding new avenues. What is different is the intensity, scale and speed. These communication technologies have no inherent nature, no natural essence that make them either democratic or authoritarian. Like all human tools, networked communication technologies can be put to different uses at different times, whilst also shaping the social context in which they are used. While cyberspace is complex and decentralised, it is also important not to lose sight of the significance of individuals.

Through participation in logistics and communications, digital or otherwise, each person has the potential to affect the process and progress of international relations. The rules governing this space are still in the making. Technology is not driving history: people are shaping technologies to their own ends, while those new technologies are simultaneously shaping society. This is what makes it such a fascinating topic and a central global issue.

Text adapted from Stevens, Clare and Haggman, Andreas in McGlinchey, Stephen. 2022. *Foundations of International Relations*. London: Bloomsbury.

Below is a collection of multimedia resources that help unpack, and explain the importance of global connectivity (and exploitation) to International Relations.

General overviews

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Academic debate and discussion

Digital Diplomacy in the Time of the Coronavirus Pandemic – article

The Great Debate on Cyberwarfare – Video series

Clare Stevens on US discourses about cybersecurity – podcast

Who's Winning the US-China Tech War? – podcast

Making Cyberspace Safe for Democracy – podcast

Internet and Technology research by Pew – website

Norms, Laws, and Cybersecurity – Video

Artificial Intelligence in International Affairs: Six Things the World Can Do to Prepare – Website

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