Interview – Steven Feldstein

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Steven Feldstein is a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in the Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program where he focuses on issues of technology and democracy, human rights, and U.S. foreign policy. Previously, he was the holder of the Frank and Bethine Church Chair of Public Affairs and an Associate Professor at Boise State University. He served as a Deputy Assistant Secretary in the democracy, human rights, and labor bureau in the U.S. Department of State as an appointee under President Obama, where he had responsibility for Africa policy, international labor affairs, and international religious freedom. He also served as the Director of policy at the U.S. Agency for International Development. He previously worked as counsel on the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations under Chairmen Joseph Biden and John Kerry.

Feldstein is the author of *The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology is Reshaping Power, Politics, and Resistance* (Oxford University Press, 2021). He has published research on how artificial intelligence is reshaping repression, the geopolitics of technology, China's role in advancing digital authoritarianism, and the changing patterns of internet shutdowns. He also released a global AI surveillance index to track the proliferation of advanced big data tools used by governments. He is a graduate of Princeton University and Berkeley Law.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I think the war in Ukraine has ushered in new debates about the role and use of technology in conflict and geopolitics. Given how much the internet can assist citizens in avoiding hostilities or locating life-saving services – from access to water to medical and health necessities – there are growing questions about whether protecting citizen access to information should be protected under international law. I'm also struck by how much emerging technologies, such as the Starlink satellite internet device or even crypto currencies – are playing important functions in helping Ukrainian citizens push back against Russian aggression. My hunch is that this is just the beginning of further innovations regarding digital technology and war.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

One of the biggest insights coming out of my research for my book is that we have to be careful about not being overly deterministic about the impact of technology. Technology is a tool – neither good nor bad (nor neutral) – that is wielded by actors on the ground with specific motives and incentives. In my field research, the most important factors dictating whether regimes would adopt digital repression techniques was the presence of underlying political repression or authoritarianism. As a general rule, bad governments will seek to do bad things with whatever instruments they can get ahold of.

What is digital repression and how is it achieved?

In my book, I define digital repression as "the use of information and communications technology to surveil, coerce, or manipulate individuals or groups in order to deter specific activities or beliefs that challenge the state." Digital repression comprises five broad categories of techniques: surveillance, censorship, social manipulation and disinformation, internet shutdowns, and the targeted persecution of online users. These five techniques are not

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mutually exclusive, in many circumstances they overlap. However, each category also relies on a unique set of tools to perform its objectives, which is why they've been grouped separately.

In your recent book, *The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology is Reshaping Power, Politics, and Resistance,* **you examine case studies of digital repression around the globe. Can you give us specifics on a few interesting examples?**

In the book, I include specific chapters looking at digital repression instances in Thailand, the Philippines, and Ethiopia. Each of these case-studies offers a unique set of insights to better understand the trajectory of digital repression. In Thailand, the government deploy digital repression strategies to advance its political agenda; its context offers insights into how an autocratic state with a tradition of censorship has adapted to the digital era. The Thai government combines information controls with traditional repression, providing the state with potent capabilities to manage dissent. Thailand also demonstrates how digital repression is born from and develops out of internal factors – external actors, whether the United States or China, only have limited influence in shaping the state's strategies. For the Philippines, I examine how former president Rodrigo Duterte implemented a unique strategy of social manipulation and disinformation to advance his agenda. The chapter looks at democratic backsliding in the Philippines, explores the meaning of Duterte's political ascent, and investigates principal drivers of digital repression in the country – particularly the complicated relationship between internet platforms like Facebook and the spread of illiberal speech in the country. My third case study looks at Ethiopia, a country that continues to be roiled by civil war. I look at the government's internet shutdown strategy, growing levels of social manipulation and disinformation, as well as surveillance and censorship concerns. Chinese companies have a considerable presence in Ethiopia, and I also consider to what extent Chinese officials have enabled repression in the country.

In a 2020 blog post, you mention that most of China's digital repression lies in advanced surveillance, both domestically and abroad. Has this strategy continued? How does it compare to the strategies of other autocratic states?

China deploys a range of tools when it comes to advancing digital repression tactics in other countries. Its companies are world leaders when it comes to exporting surveillance technologies, such as facial recognition (which allow countries like Uganda or Serbia to track and monitor opposition candidates). Chinese companies are also very active in selling censorship tools (offering everything from cyberspace management to internet firewall technology to countries such as Vietnam, Kazakhstan, and Tanzania).

Additionally, you write that digital repression is occurring in predominantly autocratic countries. With democracy declining around the world, do you expect to see digital repression occurring more frequently in democracies as well?

To be clear, digital repression is taking place in both authoritarian and democratic countries. But there is a much higher prevalence of digital repression occurring in authoritarian states. The likelihood that an authoritarian country like Saudi Arabia will rely on digital repression strategies versus a democracy like Ghana is significantly higher. The growing tide of authoritarianism unfortunately seems to suggest that a many more non-democratic regimes will rely on digital tools to support their autocratic objectives in the coming years.

What are the potential consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in relation to government use of technology, both within Russia and outside of it?

As I mentioned above, Russia's invasion has put a spotlight on the importance of tech to geopolitics. Russia already demonstrated concerning digital trends prior to the war with a crackdown on independent press, pressure on digital platforms to take down anti-Kremlin content, and implementation of surveillance and censorship restrictions. The war has accelerated these patterns, virtually closing off Russian citizens from independent media sources and forcing out external platforms in favor of Russian ones (such as Yandex, VK) that the Kremlin can control. The future is dismal when it comes to the ability of Russian citizens to access independent voices and to get a clearer picture of the devastation Putin has wrought on the country.

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Is there a relationship between economic turmoil and the use of digital repression by states?

There certainly can be. For many autocratic countries, part of the "bargain" made with elites is that in exchange for political control, the government will promote economic growth or at least promise to stay out of economic affairs. Thailand is a good example of how this has played out – the government consistently deploys censorship strategies to choke off citizen access to information so it can maintain its power, but it also is sensitive to outside perspectives that could damage its economic model. As a result, it will refrain from carrying out certain digital repression strategies if the business community feels this will jeopardize outside investment (relates to the idea of the "dictator's digital dilemma" described in my book).

What strategies, if any, can individual citizens use to oppose autocratic regimes attempting to digitally repress their rights?

It depends on the regime and the context, but there are lots of strategies civil society organizations can pursue. One important idea is for groups to link with outside actors and facilitate international pressure on regimes that are violating digital rights. This could mean pressing the United States and other democracies to implement sanctions or to issue public statements criticizing repressive governments. Another idea is for groups to experiment with innovation and adaptation when faced with digital repression, In my book, I profile how Ethiopian opposition groups were forced to adapt to internet shutdowns by using physical networks and other means to transmit information about government abuses. Ultimately, they successfully pressured the government in power and precipitated a shift in leadership.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

One of the best experiences I had was working overseas for one year in Rwanda as part of the Princeton in Africa program. Getting real-world experience outside of the United States and grappling up close with major dilemmas regarding post-conflict justice, reconciliation, and war, was a transformative experience for me. Princeton in Africa (where I currently serve as a board member) and other programs like it (such as the Peace Corps) are still up and running and are worthy of strong consideration for students who seek to become future IR professionals.