

Technology, Politics, and A Tale of Two Outcomes

How Digitization Weakens Democracy and Strengthens Autocracy

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Abstract

There is an emerging scholarly consensus that unprecedented access to information and lower barriers to political participation, ushered in by digitization and digital technologies, have not strengthened democracy. From mob lynchings in India to the 2021 US Capitol insurrections, social media recommendation algorithms have played a role in amplifying conspiracy theories, disinformation, and propaganda. Outside liberal democracies, the use of digital technologies in autocratic regimes has come to be seen as a mixed blessing. While digital technologies have assisted democratic activism in overthrowing dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, they have also evolved into powerful tools for regime entrenchment by strengthening, among others, state surveillance and censorship capabilities.

How do we explain these outcomes, that is, the weakening of democracy and the strengthening of autocracy amid the digital changes taking place across political regimes? This cumulative dissertation locates these trends that belie the initial euphoria about the democratic potential of digital technologies in the center of a largely underregulated global digital sphere and socio-technical designs that leave internet users vulnerable to mis- and disinformation, as well as online harassment and abuse. It advances understandings about these patterns by weaving feature-based, regime-centric, and micro-level approaches into a unified synoptic framework that sheds a closer and more nuanced light on different dimensions of digitally-induced changes that drive the outcomes of my interest. Each approach inspired different theoretical lenses and cases employed to subject my/our arguments to empirical scrutiny.

The first article offers a new theoretical lens on how attitudinal and behavioral effects associated with the three key features of digital technologies, namely, the abundance of contradictory information, the decreasing ability of consumers to assess its truthfulness, and AI-assisted algorithmic targeting of users with personalized content, undermine democracy as a regime type. An empirical probe into the two case studies of COVID-19 demonstrations in

Germany and the US Capitol attack in 2021 demonstrates that digital technologies can foster misbelief and, subsequently, anti-democratic behavior or agnosticism, which consequently translates into political apathy. The second article theoretically situates digital astroturfing at the center of autocratic regime threat perception and adopts a mixed-methods approach to granularly examine 14,443 tweets linked to the Thai military in February 2020. The findings demonstrate that astroturfing constitutes an important legitimation tool – one that autocrats employ in response to offline events that spark online discourses with collective action potential. The third article goes beyond (and below) the regime-centric paradigm, examining how state-aligned countermovement actors support repertoires of repression. Leveraging a diachronic comparison of protests during Bahrain’s 2011 Pearl Roundabout uprising and Myanmar’s 2021 military coup, it shows that prominent state-aligned social media users exploited social media affordances to document posts with anti-regime leanings, publicize identities of dissident posters, and call on authorities to arrest the latter.

Altogether, this cumulative dissertation contextualizes these dynamics within broader comparative political regimes that shape the participation and inclusion (or exclusion) of their citizens. While digital technologies amplify socio-political processes that weaken democracy’s institutional guardrails, their use in autocracies has further contributed to the deepening of authoritarian traits in these regimes. These insights not only extend the frontiers of digitally-adjacent political science research but also signal the need to incorporate more technical understandings of current and emerging digital tools into the research agenda amid the ever-increasing pervasiveness of digital capital in authoritarianism research.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

At the height of the 2011 Egyptian uprising, computer engineer-turned-activist Wael Ghonim imparted a message of hope to CNN's Wolf Blitzer: "If you want to liberate a government, give them the Internet" (Los Angeles Times 2011). Ghonim, who hosted the first Facebook page that organized the January 25 protests, was referring to the fact that – like the uprising in Tunisia – much of the nationwide demonstrations that toppled longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak were organized on Twitter and Facebook. When Blitzer asked, "Tunisia, then, Egypt, what's next?", Ghonim replied succinctly: "Ask Facebook" (Los Angeles Times 2011). Five years later, Egypt had already descended into military rule under the leadership of Abdel Fatah al-Sisi. The Ministry of Interior intensified its online monitoring, procured new intelligence systems capable of surveilling social media, and began intercepting private messaging through its "Social Networks Security Hazard Monitoring" program (Jumet 2022). Ghonim, looking back at the technology that once empowered disenfranchised people to mobilize and overthrow a seemingly entrenched dictator, imparted a more sobering message: "The same tool that united us to topple dictators eventually tore us apart" (Shearlaw 2017).

Egypt's short-lived democratic experiment amid increasing domestic internet penetration rates constitutes one of the numerous puzzling stories that cast doubt on the initial euphoria perpetuated by the liberal discourse of "liberation technology" (Diamond 2010).¹ At the turn of the millennium, democracy hopefuls and technological evangelicals in the West often talked about the "democratizing" potential of digital technology, that is, the tremendous potential for digital technology to improve democracy, such as making it more convenient,

¹ See International Telecommunication Union's data hub on "Individuals using the Internet" in Egypt at <https://datahub.itu.int/data/?e=EGY&i=11624&v=chart>.

more participatory, or more inclusive (see i.a., Becker 1998; Diamond 2010; Meraz and Papacharissi 2013). From this perspective, digitization and the information and communication technologies that come with it, including the internet and mobile phones, are seen as dichotomous with the expansions of political, social, and economic freedom in a way that would render authoritarian forms of governance obsolete (Diamond 2010). However, it is the ideological and evidence-free implication underlying this line of theorization that failed to anticipate the complex dynamics and unintended consequences of digitization for democratization. These include, among others, big tech's commercialization of user data and the weaponization of platforms' free expression capabilities by anti-democratic actors to incite fear, confusion, chaos, and polarization (Zuboff 2019; McKay and Tenove 2021; Švedkauskas et al. 2020).

As the internet and global freedom indicators continue to decline (Gorokhovskaia and Grothe 2024; Funk et al. 2024), the utopian optimism has given way to disillusionment. There is an emerging scholarly consensus that unprecedented access to information and lower barriers to participation have not strengthened democracy and political pluralism (Carothers 2015; Diamond 2019; Kendall-Taylor 2020). In autocracies, digital technologies have become powerful tools with which autocratic incumbents can innovate and enhance their ruling techniques in a variety of ways to ensure regime survivability (Schlumberger et al. 2024; Feldstein 2021; Frantz et al. 2020). For instance, technological affordances such as anonymity and identity shielding have enabled state-linked actors to fabricate political support *en masse* and thereby create an illusion of regime legitimacy (King et al. 2017; Bradshaw et al. 2020).² In a similar fashion, the unintended consequence of digitization has exacerbated polarization

² Affordances refer to the “multifaceted relational structure” (Faraj and Azad 2012: 254) between the object/technology and the user that enables or constrains potential behavioral outcomes in a particular context (Evans et al. 2017: 8).

amongst constituents in liberal democracies to the point of tribalism and authoritarianism. From violence against minorities in India (Saaliq and Pathi 2021) to the grand spectacle of the 2021 US Capitol insurrection (Timberg et al. 2021), recommendation algorithms built into social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have amplified citizens' exposures to mis- and disinformation, conspiracy theories, and propaganda, which, in turn, undermine the public's confidence in democratic institutions and information itself (see also Bateman and Jackson 2024; Faddoul et al. 2020; Levy 2021).

In light of these startling developments, this cumulative dissertation is grounded in two central questions of a similar nature:

(1) How does digitization weaken democracy?

(2) How does digitization strengthen autocracy?

The thesis at the heart of this dissertation rests on foundational research that challenges and sensitizes advocates of the “techno-utopian” view to the many ways digitization and the technologies that come with this process can endanger democracy and empower autocracy, either by design or by accident. Specifically, I argue that the socio-technical novelties pertaining to digitization catalyze three notable institutional transformations. First, digitization has transformed the informational environment in which citizens are increasingly exposed to an abundance of contradictory information, which, in turn, exacerbates political polarization and societal fragmentation, as well as engenders apathy. Second, the information and communication technologies that power major social media platforms have introduced novel means in which a user can disguise or misrepresent their identities in such a way that has enabled manipulative and unaccountable communication practices. Third, digital communication platforms enhance informal mechanisms of social and political control in

autocracies by creating new avenues of engagement through which pro-regime citizens can surveil social media for dissent.

Notwithstanding significant substantive and methodological strides achieved in the fields of digital authoritarianism and democratization to demonstrate the causal factors and processes by which digitization does not automatically beget the strengthening of democratic institutions, two palpable gaps require further rigorous treatment.

First, although the impact of the digital revolution on politics appears to be multifaceted and unfolding across various societal levels (Cupac et al. 2024), we continue to have a fragmented understanding of this phenomenon. Only a handful of studies and scholarly efforts have sought to integrate the larger fragmentations of country case studies from the respective universes of democracies and autocracies into a unified, multi-level comparative framework (Cupac et al. 2024; Gurol et al. 2024). This stems from the fact that most existing works tend to focus on specific issues, contexts, and ecosystems such as, to name a few, the US's right-wing media landscape (see i.a., Benkler et al. 2018), Russia's disinformation campaigns in the US and Europe (see i.a., Dawson and Innes 2019; Bradshaw et al. 2022; Švedkauskas et al. 2020; Lanoszka 2019), Singapore's creation of internet brigades to soft-sell government policies (Tan 2020), regime-backed patriotic hacking in Syria (Conduit 2023), or the development of high-tech surveillance states in China and Russia (Zeng 2020). Second, the current scholarship on political disinformation tends to privilege a Cold War paradigm (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2022), focusing on countries that dominate Western geopolitical priorities and concerns. As a result, the Western scholarship's overwhelming fixation on revisionist autocracies such as Russia and China leads to impoverished understandings of changes and adaptations in other autocracies around the globe that have also increasingly subverted digital technologies into tools for regime entrenchment (see i.a., Jones 2022).

To fill these lacunas, my work follows Cupac et al. (2022) in employing a synoptic framework to weave together feature-based, regime-centric, and micro-level approaches into an understanding of how micro-level features of digital technologies pave the way for macro-structural changes in political institutions across democratic and authoritarian contexts. Furthermore, it seeks to cast a wider net beyond autocratic regimes occupying the apex of Western geopolitical concerns in order to draw up new empirical data that provides deeper insights into how digitization strengthens the hands of autocratic incumbents.

This dissertation's synoptic framework presents new theoretical concepts and empirical data to better understand the unfulfilled promises of digital technology for democratization. Three respective articles are presented to illustrate the socio-political implications of digital transformations, namely the struggle for citizens to distinguish false from factual information, the emergence of new digital communication platforms for disguising amplifiers of deceptive communication, and the compression of temporal and spatial fields of political communication through which citizens increasingly emerge as additional sources of state power to stifle political dissent.

The first article, titled "Information, doubt, and democracy: How digitization spurs democratic decay,"³ empirically illustrates that in liberal democratic contexts, digital technologies can foster misbelief and subsequently spur anti-democratic behavior, or informational agnosticism, which consequently translates into political apathy. The second article, titled "Drowning out dissent: The Thai military's quest to fabricate popular support on Twitter,"⁴ demonstrates how a regime-linked state actor in a closed autocracy can use social media to create a network of sockpuppets to create and amplify a semblance of popular support for the incumbent in response to anti-regime discourses online. The third article, titled

³ The article was first published online in *Democratization* on August 7, 2023.

⁴ The article was first published online in *The International Journal of Press/Politics* on September 13, 2024.

“Deepening authoritarianism from below: State-aligned users the affordances of social media for supporting repression in Bahrain and Myanmar,”⁵ demonstrates how micro-level impacts of social media technology in closed autocracies result in informal mechanisms of political control that catalyze state repression.

The next section (Section 2) prepares the conceptual terrain and surveys how the relationship between digitization and contemporary political regimes – democracy and autocracy in particular – has been conceptualized thus far. It also identifies the different factors and pathways associated with digitization that drive the outcomes of my interest, that is, the weakening of democracy and the strengthening of autocracy. Building on this conceptual foundation, the third section outlines the three key dimensions of digitally-induced transformations in political rule that are at the focus of this dissertation. The fourth section presents a collection of three articles that offer innovative theoretical concepts and new empirical insights to validate established claims that digitization does not automatically or linearly lead to the strengthening of democratic institutions. Finally, this dissertation concludes with a discussion of the broader significance of the findings and suggestions for future research.

⁵ The article was submitted to *Social Movement Studies* on February 1, 2025, and has been under review since September 4, 2025.

Chapter 2

Preparing the Conceptual Terrain

The digital revolution's global impact on politics and societies across the globe has made digital technology one of the defining concepts of our time. However, because of the rapidly evolving digital landscape and technological advancements, it is imperative to place the study of digital technology and political regimes on sturdier conceptual and theoretical foundations.

2.1 Distinguishing Between Digital Technology, Digitization, and Digitalization

“Digitization” and “digitalization” are two central constructs used in relation to digital technology (Gradillas and Thomas 2023). Digital technology is considered the means of digital transformation as well as the core of digital infrastructure, platforms, and innovation (Saeed and Sidorova 2023). It refers to “all electrical devices which make use of information represented in digital form – such as binary code – to perform useful functions (Hajkowicz and Dawson 2019). Computers, smartphones, software, and sensory systems are some examples of digital technologies. Digitization, by contrast, is processual. It refers to the creation of digital artifacts through technical processes of conversion, representation, and enhancement (Gradillas and Thomas 2023). Digital artifacts are “quasi-objects” that comprise technology, information, and relationships brought together, such as personal online profiles, webpages, interfaces, and codes (Ekbia 2009). Similarly, while digitalization is also processual, it denotes transformations of the larger socio-economic environment through processes of digital artifact adoption, application, and utilization (Hajkowicz and Dawson 2019). As Cappa et al. (2021) note, digitalization involves processes of data collection, generation, and analysis to create value and enable innovation.

This dissertation uses digitization as a point of departure instead of digitalization because the former creates a basis for the sweeping set of digital technologies that transform business models, politics, and social relations to materialize. By converting analog data such as sound, images, and documents into digital format (Bruderer 2023), digitization paved the way for the creation and ownership of new social infrastructures and access to data flows (see i.a., Srnicek 2017; O’Neil 2017). This has provided business and governments with a wealth of benefits, including improved decision-making capabilities and reduced duplication (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2016: 11)

I should clarify at the outset that the dissertation focuses on digital platforms that facilitate economic and information-based exchanges between users and businesses, as opposed to those that involve hardware components such as semiconductors, central processing units, and graphic processing units. Much of the digitization of political and social life has been brought about by large tech companies that seek to profile users’ identities and online behaviors for commercialization purposes. Notably, Zuboff (2019) characterized these relations as “surveillance capitalism,” in which big tech companies Hoover up massive amounts of personal data. As a result, these tech companies wield tremendous influence in shaping social patterns through global architectures of behavioral monitoring, analysis, prediction, and modification (Zuboff 2019; Srnicek 2017).

It is well established that digital communication platforms, which are a “layered architecture of digital technology” (Yoo et al. 2010: 725), capture and monetize user-generated data in ways that can generate huge profits, while end-users are not always aware of the role that they play in a system that instrumentalizes their online behaviors as inputs (Gawer 2022). Evidence abounded that these micro-targeting practices amplify political biased narratives as well as mis- and disinformation (Nenadić 2019; Dawson 2021). In autocracies where governments wield extensive powers over data, the “datafication” of individual online behaviors for commercialization purposes has strengthened state surveillance capabilities

(O'Hara and Hall 2021). China's model of internet governance shows that digitization can also lead to further enhancement of centralized political control (O'Hara and Hall 2021; Deibert 2002).

2.2 Distinguishing Between Democratization, Authoritarianization, and Authoritarian Deepening

Increasing concerns about the possible beginning of a reverse wave of regime changes since the “third wave of democratization” have led scholars to go beyond their examination of the ingredients of successful transitions and prospects of democratization in still undemocratic countries (i.e., autocratic and totalitarian regimes). The resilience of authoritarianism in successfully modernizing autocracies such as China and Singapore, the revival of authoritarianism in Russia, the global spread of electoral autocracies, and the democratic backsliding catalyzed by trends of right-wing populism and its anti-democratic tendencies in liberal democracies such as the US and Germany are fueling concerns about the prospects of democracy (Welzel et al. 2019). On the one hand, these trends have opened up new lines of research into the conditions that erode the pillars of stability in democracies (see i.a., Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lindstaedt 2021; Gerschewski 2021), and the strengthening of autocracies, on the other (see i.a., Göbel 2011; Sinkkonen 2021; Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2020).

Against this backdrop, the concept “authoritarianization”⁶ has increasingly garnered significant scholarly attention. The term has roots in Linz's (1964) prominent definition of

⁶ A plethora of terminologies (e.g., “democratic backsliding,” “democratic erosion,” “democratic regression,” and “autocratization”) have been created to describe the loss of democratic quality. I acknowledge the debates underlying these different terms, but do not aim to resolve them here. Within this purview of this framing paper, “authoritarianization” best serves the purpose because the term captures the end scenario in which the loss of democratic quality culminates in a transition to dictatorship.

authoritarianism. Notwithstanding the diversity of authoritarian subtypes that have been conceptualized in the literature (see i.a., Chehabi and Linz 1998; Geddes 1999; Geddes et al. 2014; Schedler 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010), authoritarianism is viewed as an ex-negativo class of political regime that lies between democracy and totalitarianism (Schlumberger and Schedler 2020: 713). According to Linz (1964: 297), an authoritarian regime has four traits that are characterized by: (1) limited, not responsible, pluralism; (2) absence of an elaborate and guiding ideology; (3) political apathy; and (4) single leader or a small clique that exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones. This makes authoritarian regimes incompatible with democracy on several dimensions defined by Dahl's (1971; 1989) polyarchy, which understands democracy in terms of seven attributes: (1) elected officials; (2) free and fair elections; (3) inclusive suffrage; (4) the right to run for office; (5) freedom of expression; (6) freedom of information; and (7) associational autonomy.

From this perspective, democratization – the “the way democratic norms, institutions, and practices evolve and are disseminated both within and across national and cultural boundaries” (Croissant and Haynes 2014), reflects episodes that exhibit substantial and sustained improvements on these traits. By contrast, authoritarianization is one type of democratic erosion that involves the deliberate dismantling of democratic rule and its transition to authoritarian government (Schlumberger and Schedler 2020: 717). Authoritarianization is an umbrella concept, encompassing several phenomena of change such as democratic regression/backsliding (i.e., when the core features of liberal democracy postulated by Dahl are eroded) before a democratic regime transitions into a dictatorship.⁷ In already autocratic regimes, further entrenchment of authoritarian rule can be understood as “authoritarian

⁷ It is important to note that the decline of democratic regimes may not always result in complete democratic breakdown. For further discussions, see, for example, Lührmann and Lindberg (2019).

deepening,” that is, the deepening of the traits of authoritarianism (Lindstaedt 2021; Tomini et al. 2023; Akçay 2021).

Neither of these concepts can be defined by fixed and timeless objective criteria (Whitehead 2002). Nor are they discrete and observable events in which countries abruptly move across a particular threshold and transition to democracy and vice versa (Cupac et al 2024). Instead, they are seen as a gradual, non-linear, and multifaceted process that can be observed in changes to various political institutions and norms (Cupac et al. 2024). Both democratization and authoritarianization can take place at any point on the continuum (Cassani and Tomini 2020). Consolidated democracies can experience further democratization, leading to democratic deepening, but also authoritarianization that may culminate in democratic breakdown. Likewise, autocratic regimes can both democratize and undergo authoritarian deepening through, for example, authoritarian consolidation (Göbel 2011).

This understanding of political changes as a multifaceted process allows for the development of theoretical intuitions about the effects of digitization on democratic and autocratic politics in relation to the traits delineated by Dahl and Linz, respectively. This includes exploring the sub-structural changes introduced by digitization and how they translate into broader structural threats for democracy or advantages for autocracy. At the same time, my work aspires to join an emerging strand of authoritarianism research that transcends conventional regime- and state-centric paradigms to examine how specific properties of certain digital technology enable and incentivize authoritarian practices by informal, pro-regime actors below the level of the state.

Chapter 3

A Synoptic Framework to Examine Digitally-Driven Transformations Across Political Regimes

Building on this conceptual terrain, this section identifies three digitally-driven political transformations within democracies and autocracies in relation to their stability as a regime type, alongside the evolving dynamics of societal participation below the regime level. The identification and elaboration of these dimensions help ground the overarching research questions in what is known about the effects of digitization in order to better establish a synoptic framework with which each of the three articles can further present targeted theoretical and empirical insights on the phenomenon. As Cupac et al. (2024: 900) argue, a synoptic framework offers a “comprehensive lens that recognizes not only the versatility of AI technologies but also the political contexts in which they are developed, deployed, and regulated.” The dimensions I propose below are by no means exhaustive (cf. i.a., Cupac et al. 2024; Gurol et al. 2024; Jungherr and Schroder 2021; Jungherr 2023). However, because of the current knowledge gaps in linking the effects of these dimensions to political rule, they call for new and upgraded theoretical and empirical insights to further understand the elements of change that are taking place.

- (1) *First dimension of transformation:* An informational environment in which citizens are increasingly unable to distinguish false from factual information.

Digitization has brought tremendous changes to the way information is produced and consumed. Advancements in digital technologies and the rise of prominence of new digital communication platforms such as Meta (formerly Facebook) and X (formerly Twitter) have

disrupted legacy media's place in the news ecology as the traditional gatekeepers to information (Vos 2015). In particular, these platforms have become new gatekeepers in their own right, partially displacing traditional news outlets and journalists as the primary engine of public discourse (Bhagwat 2023).⁸ While this development is not entirely negative because it enables citizens to seek out alternative sources of information outside of mainstream media institutions that tend to marginalize or exclude minority perspectives (Morrison and Pederson 2024), digital communication platforms have also facilitated the spread of false and misleading information at a faster rate than factual information (Vosoughi et al. 2018).

It is widely acknowledged that new digital communication platforms, particularly social media, which has become one of the defining mediums of information exchanges, are not “neutral intermediaries” (Chadwick 2017; Gillespie 2018). Instead, the companies that own these sites and the infrastructure shape the genres, speed, curation, and dissemination of patterns of communication in new and often problematic ways (McKay and Tenove 2020). Chief among these concerns is the role of algorithms,⁹ which determine the discoverability of content via search engines, set the order of messages in social media newsfeeds, and offer altering and often micro-targeted lists of “trending topics” to users (McKay and Tenove 2020: 704-705). Algorithmic curation lacks transparency since most users do not possess sufficient insights into how their individual information feeds are moderated, nor do independent researchers have sufficient access to the data needed to properly make sense of content dissemination patterns (McKay and Tenove 2020: 705). To satisfy social media companies' business goals, this “black

⁸ Livingston and Bennett (2003) find that technological advances within institutions have not altered the core gatekeeping practice of “officiating” news through official sources.

⁹ An algorithm can be defined as “a set of rules that precisely define a sequence of operations” (Jones 1971: 4). Scholars in the fields of digital humanities, however, have approached the term more critically. Far from purely computational tools, algorithms are said to be “opinions embedded in mathematics” (O’Neil 2017: 21) because they calculate an opinion about the given technology (Forberg 2022: 294).

box moderation” (McKay and Tenove 2020: 705) employs “engagement-optimizing algorithms that prioritize enticing content – even if from a source peddling clickbait or political outrage, or promoted by bots, trolls, or sockpuppets” (Kornbluh et al. 2020: 8).

While the abundance of information catalyzed by the evolving suite of digital technologies has helped people independently cultivate a political identity and provided them with personalized civic knowledge (Woolley and Howard 2016: 4884), it has engendered an “information overload” that harms decision-making (Jiang 2022). This is exacerbated by the evolution of social networking capabilities of digital communication platforms into advertisement-driven and monetization tools that embrace the mining of user data for commercialization purposes. As social media platform companies mine user data to improve algorithmic targeting of personalized content, this has amplified the spread of content that conforms to users’ pre-held beliefs (Pariser 2011). Furthermore, recommendation algorithms are said to promote emotionally provocative content and also contribute to the formation of homophilous communities (Burton 2023; Kaiser et al. 2020).¹⁰ While algorithms remain a black box for researchers, some algorithms have promoted controversial content, misinformation, and conspiracy theories (The Wall Street Journal 2021; Arguedas 2022). Consequently, as mob lynchings in India and the 2021 US Capitol insurrection show (Saaliq and Pathi 2021; Timberg et al. 2021), the spread of polarizing content has spurred incidents of violence and actions that harm the foundations of democracy. In other cases, the substantial increases in cognitive costs of determining what information is accurate or reliable are said to reduce reactance and counter-arguing to less credible messages, thus rendering individuals apathetic to the deliberative process that is crucial for the functioning of democracy (Nisbet and Kamenchuk 2019). For instance, social media fatigue wrought by information overload reduces fact-checking inclinations (Jiang 2022).

¹⁰ Homophily refers to the connectedness between communities.

(2) *Second dimension of transformation:* New means for users to disguise and misrepresent their identities.

The new means by which online users can anonymize their identities offer an indispensable cover for individuals wanting to express critical political views that would normally expose them to public backlash or government repression. For example, they can enhance inclusion and expose a “false impression of conformity” of opinion on issues (McKay and Tenove 2020). In autocratic contexts where state surveillance is often organized to implement a preemptive policy of persecution, the anonymity afforded by social media platforms has enabled activists to negotiate their socially mediated visibility more dynamically (Pearce et al. 2018). Evidence from the 2011 Egyptian uprising to the Navalny movement in Russia to the 2020-2021 anti-government protests in Thailand points to how digitally-enabled identity concealments help movements look like distributed mass user activity rather than a structured organization, which helps to avoid preemptive repression (Al-Ani et al. 2012; Herasimenka 2022; Mahtani and Wangkiat 2020)

At the same time, however, the ability of users to disguise their online identities can also enable manipulative and unaccountable communication (McKay and Tenove 2020). Disinformation actors frequently misrepresent their identities through the use of sockpuppets, that is, fake accounts operated by humans, or “political bots,” that is, “algorithms written to learn and mimic real people to manipulate public opinion across a diverse range of social media and device networks” (Woolley and Howard 2016: 4886). Some of these bots have been programmed to perform standard and complex tasks such as automatically liking posts, retweeting from specific users, posting a set of predetermined messages to enhance pro-regime narratives in bulk, and interacting more naturally with other real users on social media (Chan 2022; Harding 2024). As Moore (2018: 1823) argues, the misrepresentation of identity “leaves

the listener unable to judge the interests, agendas, and biases of the speaker, and thereby creates opportunities for strategic and deceptive communication.” In recent years, autocracies (as well as some democracies) have created a network of sockpuppets to influence public discourse on a variety of political issues (Bradshaw et al. 2020; Keller et al. 2020). These new capabilities that afford users to disguise and misrepresent authors’ identities is one of many means by which digitization can decrease accountability and exacerbate issues of source credibility and believability (McKay and Tenove 2020; Pearson 2020).

From the standpoint of regime power maintenance, these deceptive practices serve authoritarian legitimation efforts. Controlling the belief systems of their citizens to maintain the ideological foundations of such regimes has long been a central element of authoritarian rule (Schlumberger et al. 2024). By altering and controlling narratives, authoritarian regimes render the populace oblivious to their oppression and limit support for collective actions. Authoritarian rulers have sponsored foreign and domestic digital astroturfing campaigns to disrupt elections and to hijack contentious debates about human rights and democratic reforms (Švedkauskas et al. 2020; Jones 2022). In combination with leveraging their in-house capabilities, governments and political parties have also outsourced their digital astroturfing campaigns to third-party digital “mercenaries” (DiResta et al. 2022; Pomerantsev 2019).

(3) *Third dimension of transformation:* Creation of new avenues of engagement that enhance informal mechanisms of social and political control.

The proactive use of digital communication platforms by citizens to self-organize in the pursuit of security and safety (as well as deciding how and when they will involve the police in their activities) is driving new forms of citizen policing (Trottier 2017). Social media platforms and mobile devices provide new socio-technical interfaces that compress the temporal and spatial fields of denunciation and shaming (Trottier 2020). These offending acts and calls for

action are both retained and transmitted to a potentially immeasurable audience. Non-state actors from hacktivist collective Anonymous to so-called “pedophile hunters” are therefore able to bypass typical state and media institutions to intervene and comment more easily on the lives of citizens (Trottier 2017).¹¹

Some scholars view such forms of citizen-led policing as a direct contestation to state legitimacy because their actions exist outside, beyond, and/or part of a legitimate system of judicial law enforcement (cf. i.a., Kotarska 2023; Brooks 2019: 207). However, there is also a growing recognition that these practices contribute to the entrenchment of state power. In autocracies, private citizens who identify with authoritarian rule have weaponized digital communication platforms’ mediated visibility to reveal the identity of certain members of the population (and associated private information) with punitive intent (Gabdulhakov 2020; Kirchgaessner and Vinter 2022; Sombatpoonsiri 2020; Yesil and Sözeri 2017).

In line with these new digital realities, autocratic regimes have not only repressed dissidents based on the information provided by non-state actors but have taken steps to institutionalize bottom-up avenues for mass reporting. China’s mass reporting system has become notably digitized. In particular, the “Chaoyang Masses,” a smartphone application launched by the Public Security Bureau aimed at encouraging Chinese citizens to promptly and directly report suspects of crime and misdemeanor to the police, has expanded mass reporting channels to popular Chinese social media platforms, including WeChat and Weibo (Jiang 2021). Similarly, in Russia, pro-state vigilante formations such as *Je Suis Maidan* [I am Maidan] and *SILOVIKI* [Security Officers] have been documented to expose protesters, opposition leaders, and activists, as well as calling on their followers to retaliate against these targets (Gabdulhakov 2020: 284). These new avenues of engagement through which pro-regime

¹¹ The so-called “pedophile hunters” refers to members of the public who pretend to be children online in order to “trap” pedophiles and ultimately shame them or bring them to justice (Trottier 2017).

citizens can increasingly monitor and report online dissent, therefore, create an illusion of citizen-led participation in domestic affairs, while simultaneously reinforcing the fear of ubiquitous surveillance and the all-seeing gaze of the state (Gabdulhakov 2020: 296)

Chapter 4

An Overview of the Contributions

By now, this dissertation is structured by three ideas about the digitally-induced socio-political transformations as a struggle for citizens to distinguish false from factual information, the emergence of new digital communication platforms for disguising amplifiers of deceptive communication, and the compression of temporal and spatial fields of political communication through which citizens increasingly emerge as additional sources of state power to stifle political dissent. This section proceeds to provide a cursory overview of the three articles at the heart of this dissertation that give us a deeper dive into each of these dimensions of transformation.

The first article offers a new theoretical lens to better understand the implications of the first dimension of transformation in the context of liberal democracies, that is, a changing informational environment in which citizens are increasingly unable to distinguish false information from factual information. Democratic theory has long maintained that access to information is central to the functioning of democracy (Dahl 1971: 3). Notwithstanding expanded access to varieties of information at an unprecedented level, digital technologies have contributed to misbeliefs and instances of offline violence (Barker 2020; Timberg et al. 2021).

This article theorizes on this basis how the three key features of digitization, namely, the abundance of contradictory information, decreasing ability of consumers to assess its truthfulness, and artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted algorithmic targeting of users with personalized content, produce attitudinal and behavioral effects that undermine democracy as a regime type. A plausibility probe into the 2020 COVID-19 demonstrations in Germany and the 2021 Capitol insurrection in the US preliminarily demonstrates that digitization and the digital

technologies can foster misbelief, and, subsequently, anti-democratic behavior, or agnosticism, which consequently translates into political apathy.

While the first article engages in theory-building and illustrates concrete, multi-level causal mechanisms that underlie the relationship between digitization and democratic decay in established liberal democracies, the remaining two contributions situate the effects of digitization in closed autocracies, which have traditionally existed in a particularly information-scarce environment (Gunitsky 2015). Thailand (2014-2022), Myanmar (2021-present), and Bahrain (1972-present) all rank as closed autocracies (V-DEM 2024) that offer empirically rich case studies to illustrate how digitization strengthens autocracy with respect to the second and third dimensions of transformations.

The second article uses the emerging phenomenon of digital astroturfing in autocracies as a basis for examining how the second dimension of transformation, that is, the creation of new means for disguising and/or misrepresenting authors and amplifiers of communication, relates to legitimation – a key pillar of authoritarian stability (Gerschewski 2013). Digital astroturfing is a form of manufactured, deceptive, and strategic top-down activity on the Internet initiated by political actors that mimics bottom-up activity by autonomous individuals (Kovic et al. 2018). Whether government-run or outsourced (DiResta et al. 2022), regime-linked actors exploit social media's relative anonymity to shape the public's positive identification with autocratic rule (King et al. 2017). This article theoretically situates the phenomenon of digital astroturfing in autocracies at the center of regime threat perception and adopts a mixed-methods approach to granularly examine 14,443 tweets linked to the Thai military in February 2020. Findings from the Thai context demonstrate that digital astroturfing constitutes an important autocratic legitimation tool that incumbents employ in response to offline events that spark online discourses with collective action potential.

The third article departs from the second article by moving beyond (and below) the regime- and state-centric paradigm to examine how the third dimension of transformation, that

is, the emergence of new engagement avenues through which citizens emerge as additional sources of power, relates to sources of authoritarian regime stability. It builds upon existing bodies of empirical evidence that informal networks of non-state, anti-democratic actors spanning pro-government digital vigilantes, right-wing media organizations, and anti-election networks have used social media platforms to name, shame, and “doxx” online users deemed hostile to the regime (Gabdulhakov 2020; Pearce 2015; Loh 2021; Sombatpoonsiri 2020; Tucker et al. 2017).¹² In particular, this article examines how state-aligned countermovement actors have subverted the affordances of social media to support repertoires of repression. Countermovement actors refer to actors that contradict the political claims of original movement actors that seek to translate dissent into collective action against authoritarian incumbents (Mayer and Staggenborg 1996). Leveraging a diachronic comparison of protests during Bahrain’s 2011 Pearl Roundabout uprising and Myanmar’s 2021 military coup, it shows that prominent state-aligned social media users exploited social media affordances to publicize identities of dissident social media posters while calling on authorities to arrest them.

¹² Doxxing is a type of online denunciation practice that, in addition to naming and shaming a user, typically involves collecting and sharing the targeted user’s personal details by publishing them on a public site (Trottier 2017: 56).

Chapter 5

Information, Doubt, and Democracy: How Digitization Spurs Democratic Decay (Article No. 1)

Abstract:

The amount of information available to citizens due to global digitization and new technologies is unprecedented. However, in established democracies where access to alternative sources of information is guaranteed and educational levels are high, we witness a rise in attitudes and actions that threaten democratic foundations. Some citizens succumb to misinformation that has led them down the path of radicalization and violence; others withdraw completely from political life. How do we explain these developments? Building on democratic theory and the concepts of informational learned helplessness and selective exposure, we introduce a theoretical framework that connects digitization and digital technologies to attitudes and behavior that threaten democracy even before democratic decay manifests. We argue that AI-assisted digital technologies expose societies to an abundance of contradictory information, limit citizens' ability to assess their trustworthiness, and reinforce the tailored dissemination of misinformation. We present the US and Germany as empirical plausibility probes that show how these features drive some citizens towards informational agnosticism, which results in depoliticization and political apathy. Others might become misbelievers who display negative attitudes towards democracy and/or engage in anti-democratic actions. Our probe offers an initial empirical illustration that provides a basis for further systematic investigations of digital technology's effects on democracy.

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*All authors contributed equally to this article. Ahmed Maati and Koray Saglam developed the initial scope of the article. Chonlawit Sirikupt focused on the empirical plausibility probes. Koray Saglam concretized the political-economic theoretical framework. Oliver Schlumberger and Mirjam Edel sharpened the arguments' link to democratic theory. Koray Saglam and Oliver Schlumberger proofread the article and sharpened its overall coherence. Writing, revising, and finalizing the article were done equally at various stages of the project. The authors would like to thank Jelena Cupac, Hendrik Schopmans, and Irem Tuncer-Ebetürk from the Berlin Social Science Center for their helpful comments. The authors would also like to thank Žilvinas Švedkauskas, research assistant Victoria Wang, and all participants of the Chair's research colloquium.

5.1 Digitization, Information, and Democratic Decay

Democratic theory has long stressed the centrality of information for the proper functioning of democracy (Dahl 1971: 3). When governments restrict access to information, citizens lack a fundamental requisite to meaningful participation and informed decision making. Free access to information has, therefore, been theorized to be conducive rather than detrimental to democracy (Carpini and Keeter 2002: 131). But while digitization and artificial intelligence (AI) have exponentially expanded access to varieties of information, they have also posed threats to democracy in different places (Tucker et al. 2018). From the UK's Brexit referendum to mob lynching in India, these developments have aggravated trends of what scholars have termed "democratic regression", "erosion", "backsliding", "de-democratization", or "authoritarianization."¹³

We know that digital technologies and AI contribute to misinformed attitudes and anti-democratic behavior. In this contribution, we propose an analytical framework that provides the hitherto missing link between digitization and AI on the one hand and such attitudes and behavior on the socio-psychological level on the other. We suggest an integrated framework for analyzing the origins of democratic decay that starts not with misinformation and anti-democratic behavior, but with where these dispositions stem from. In doing so, we highlight political agnosticism and apathy as symptoms of the digital transformation that have important ramifications for democracy.

¹³ A plethora of terms has been invented to refer to this phenomenon. While aware of these debates, we do not seek to settle them here; rather, we agree with Gerschewski that all these terms are "broadly defined as a loss in democratic quality," all the while acknowledging that measurement of such decay is, again, debated (cf., i.a., Diamond and Morlino (eds), *Assessing the quality of democracy* for an overview of discussions on this topic). In the following, we refer to the said phenomenon as democratic decay.

Digitization and AI-assisted technologies increase citizens' costs of identifying reliable information, which can cause states of selective exposure¹⁴ (Stavositu 2014; Stroud 2008) and informational learned helplessness (ILH) (Nisbet and Kamenchuk 2021).¹⁵ This induces citizens to either become misinformed or politically apathetic. We link misinformation and political apathy back to elements of democratic theory and political regime theory to explain why and how they pose dangers to democracy. To be sure, the variables that determine the resilience of any given democracy to such threats are manifold, and it is beyond the scope of this contribution to examine them in depth. While these variables determine whether only some modest decay or a full-fledged breakdown of democracy will occur, this is not our focus.¹⁶ Instead, we aim to complete the explanatory chain that links AI and digitization more broadly to the phenomena of democratic decay by showing how technology creates psychopolitical dispositions among citizens; these dispositions can, even if not immediately, become a manifest danger to democratic regimes up to the point of democratic breakdown.

While the breakdown of trust in the possibility that truth is knowable can lead to extremism (Gowen 2018), anti-democratic violence, and political disengagement (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 10; Wenzel 2019: 1987–88), research does not holistically capture

¹⁴ In short, “selective exposure” refers to individuals choosing information sources consonant with their worldview.

¹⁵ In contrast to the Russian case they study, however, reference to ILH in democracies refers to citizens' unavoidable exposure to contradictory information.

¹⁶ We do not seek to explain regime-level *outcomes* that may (and empirically do) differ quite dramatically between cases such as Russia, Hungary or Turkey (where democracy was abolished altogether during the past two decades), or Poland, the US or Brazil (where a tangible erosion of democratic quality is undisputed despite the fact that these cases may still qualify as democracies), and, third, cases such as France, Germany, or Sweden (where we identify “stress factors” such as significant parts of the populace falling prey to misinformation or political apathy even though a decline in the quality of democracy cannot (yet) be measured). By contrast, we seek to establish a more comprehensive causal argument which, because of its comprehensiveness, will allow us to identify dangers and threats to democracy way before current measurement systems of democratic quality would detect them.

technology's influence on the emergence of attitudes and behavior that put democracy under stress. Scholars have also explored isolated instances (e.g., electoral processes and outcomes) in which misinformation¹⁷ harms specific democratic elements or procedures (Švedkauskas, Sirikupt, and Salzer 2020; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Tucker et al. 2018; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018: 341-349). However, these works remain concentrated on isolated aspects of technology and/or individual elements of democracy, thereby ignoring the larger causal chain. From a systemic perspective, digitally induced democratic decay cannot be reduced to the realms of elections, disinformation, or misbelief, despite the relevance of these realms for democracy. Others have used a “deliberative systems” approach to theorize and examine how disinformation threatens democracy by inducing “anti-deliberative effects” (McKay and Tenove 2021). We concur with these scholars that it is important to specify “which democratic goods are at risk from disinformation, and how they are put at risk” (McKay and Tenove 2021) and to consider systemic interactions (Pond 2020). However, beyond specific narratives of misinformation and technical elements like social media algorithms, it is necessary to systematically link the numerous elements of the epiphenomenological level of digitization back to democratic theory and political regime theory to confidently assess whether threats to democracy emerge, and to determine whether they are systemic or ephemeral.

We identify three features inherent to digitized information production, dissemination, and consumption that have transformed citizens' information environment. Section 2 shows how these traits cause a cognitive dissonance that can (1) make parts of the population agnostic about the very existence and relevance of “facts”, (2) predispose other parts of the population to become misinformed through selective exposure to information that fits their pre-existing

¹⁷ While misinformation and disinformation both refer to false or misleading information, disinformation is characterized as “nonaccidentally misleading information” intended to deceive people. Misinformed citizens can further share such information without having the intent to deceive (cf. Fallis 2015).

ideas; others (3) bear the higher transaction costs of verifying information to resolve the dissonance.¹⁸ Section 3, then, explains how such attitudes and the resulting behavior endanger democracy by linking them to democratic theory. Section 4 empirically validates our analytical framework through a plausibility probe into the 2021 US Capitol Hill riots and the 2020 anti-COVID protests at the German *Reichstag*. While such a probe is not a rigorous hypothesis test, it does provide anecdotal evidence and illustrates our claim about how digitization facilitates misbelief and, subsequently, anti-democratic behavior, or agnosticism and political apathy. While our article suggests a novel and more comprehensive causal chain, only further research will be able to verify such claims through more rigorous empirical testing. Yet, in our view, it is high time that an integrated view and explanation of how democratic decay actually *starts* and comes about is proposed at all, so that it can be put under closer scrutiny by the scholarly community. A discussion of the implications of our findings for future research on how digital processes may cause decay or breakdown concludes this contribution, together with a call for establishing more fine-grained early-warning systems that alert us to threats to democracy we cannot measure adequately so far – precisely because we have been lacking an explanation that comprehensively links digitization to democratic decay.

5.2 How Digitization Transforms Citizens' Information Environment

Three features of digital technologies affect the nature of information and how citizens consume it: (1) abundance of contradictory information; (2) decreasing ability of consumers to assess its truthfulness; and (3) AI-assisted algorithmic targeting of users with personalized content. These developments occur because of lagging public oversight over the digital sphere

¹⁸ We do not intend to provide a universal definition of, or engage with philosophical debates about, “truth” and “falsehood.” This would merit discussions that go beyond our scope. Our goal is rather to theorize and show the link between digitization, misinformation, and democratic decay. To illustrate this link, we examine obvious cases of misinformation and falsehoods.

that is amplified by political-economic dynamics by which commercial interests (ab)use the still largely unregulated digital space. Together, they transform the informational environment that can lead citizens to embrace misinformation or become doubtful of the existence of truth altogether.

First, digital technologies magnify the abundance of contradictory information that reaches citizens (Feldstein 2021: 3-4). While increasing the pervasiveness of information, they also diversify narratives by simultaneously turning information consumers into information producers. Users not only have a myriad of choices to express and share their preferences, but they are also able to alter the content of the information they disseminate, forward, or re-post (Feldstein 2021: 4). This results, first, in Chinese-whispers effects and, second, in the impossibility of identifying the original source of information. Consequently, unprecedented amounts of contradictory accounts of reality overwhelm citizens. Social media platforms' strategies to generate ever more user data to target consumers with fine-tuned appealing narratives exacerbate that trend (cf. Zuboff 2019).

Before the digital revolution, citizens were better able to identify the origin of information, which made it easier to evaluate its reliability and sincerity. By contrast, when information is created and disseminated by many users on numerous digital platforms, it becomes harder (and often impossible) for them to identify its sources. Furthermore, digital image and audio processing technology have immensely enhanced the sophistication of fabrications and, therefore, thwarted citizens' abilities to distinguish reality from fabrication. Competitive market mechanisms incentivize tech companies to design cutting-edge products, which further enhance the technical possibilities of creating AI-assisted deep fakes that help legitimize fringe beliefs. It is, therefore, not surprising that Europeans state that "helping citizens to better identify disinformation" is the most important public measure authorities should take against the spread of falsehood (Vaccari and Chadwick 2020; European Commission 2020: 54). Digital technologies thus lower the costs of access to information, but

counterintuitively, dramatically raise the transaction costs of being *correctly* informed; they subject wide segments of society to unprecedented difficulties in assessing the accuracy of contradictory information to which they are exposed.

Third, AI-based, self-learning algorithms provide users on digital devices with targeted content. This aggravates both the likelihood of believing misinformation and, depending on the design and purpose of the algorithm, an abundance of contradictory information: Some algorithms promote controversial content, misinformation, and conspiracy beliefs that have led to political polarization and even calls for violence (Dean 2021; Arguedass Ross et al. 2022). Citizens thus experience a psychologically and emotionally challenging overkill of contradictory claims to “truth”. Other algorithms, however, rely on the “familiarity effect” and promote content consonant with worldviews that resonate in users’ close circles of family and friends, which ultimately contributes to an increase in (mis-)information and facilitates the emergence of the so-called “filter bubbles” (Swire, Ecker, and Lewandowsky 2017, 1948–1949).

These three features inherent to digitized information environments are structurally reproduced as digital technologies become commodified products and services designed to generate profits (cf. Saglam 2022). Social media platforms and websites generate revenue through donations, subscriptions, advertisements, and data mining, which all depend on traffic.¹⁹ To increase traffic, platforms routinely employ affirmative or polarizing algorithms, or a mix thereof – irrespective of adverse socio-political outcomes (Dean 2021).

Massive quantities of information, algorithmic targeting, and a reduced ability to assess truthfulness appear most prevalent on social media, where lies spread faster than truths

¹⁹ Traffic includes frequency, interaction intensity, and a number of interactions with online content. More traffic means more data to collect and sell, more precise targeting, greater ad-revenues, and a greater likelihood that users will subscribe or donate; Kenney and Zysman, “The Rise of the Platform Economy”; Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.

(Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018). However, they pervade the entire digitized information environment,²⁰ including devices like smartphones that use algorithms for data mining and usage maximization. These are designed to incentivize users to participate in the pluralized information environment by constantly producing and disseminating content. Thus, digitization profoundly changes how citizens are confronted with information. An AI-assisted targeting of individuals with abundant contradictory information of unclear origin can produce fundamental doubts about what is true, what can be trusted, and whether (objective) facts even exist.

Psychologically, constant exposure to contradictory information creates “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger 1957) – a state where humans constantly experience cognitively (and often also emotionally) stressful contradictions. There are different possible reactions to this state: (1) Citizens succumb to ILH, i.e., they repeatedly experience an inability to access harmonious, non-contradictory information, which drives them to believe that all information are contested. To these citizens, truth appears not to be knowable or existent, which results in informational agnosticism. To resolve this dissonance, agnostics take the “exit option” and refrain from forming and expressing any opinions, or even from staying informed, which can result in apathy and ignorance.

Citizens can (2) attempt to harmonize dissonance by selectively exposing themselves to one version of discourse. Influenced by traffic-maximizing machine-learning algorithms that filter available information based on user preferences, however, this group might fall prey to belief in misinformation and retreat into “echo chambers”: “Regardless of how obscure the information we are consuming, as long as it supports pre-existing ideas and does not challenge our beliefs, we are prone to accept it” (Meyer and Böswald 2022: 13). Lastly, individuals might (3) bear the higher transaction costs of verifying information to resolve the dissonance; this

²⁰ Non-social media platforms like Spotify or Netflix use similar techniques to increase user traffic, commodify data, and share it with third parties (cf. Zuboff 2019).

constitutes a third, residual category of “the resilient” which is, however, explicitly not the focus of this article.

5.3 Why Informational Agnostics and Misbelievers Endanger Democracy

Deduced from our theoretical framework, we identify two groups whose sentiments and behavior threaten democracy: (1) the informationally agnostic and (2) misbelievers. These psychological and attitudinal consequences of digitized information environments threaten democracy *before* democratic decay becomes visible.

As ILH has been documented to result in apathy (Nagel 2005), ignorance about political matters can be expected to facilitate de-politicization, turning citizens into informational agnostics: When confronted with overwhelming amounts of contradictory narratives, citizens who renounce consuming (political) information altogether not only become agnostic on an *attitudinal* level but also display apathy as a form of political *behavior*. While Bond and Messing lack the causal step of ILH in between that we have introduced, they have, like Nagel, “consistently found that exposure to disagreement [on one’s social network] depresses engagement and [political] participation” (Bond and Messing 2015: 75).

Crucially, de-politicization and political apathy are one of four characteristics that Linz uses to define authoritarianism as a non-democratic regime (Linz 1975: 264). Some research has also found that they contribute to democratic decay (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1986: 314; Huntington 1975: 114). In fact, democratic theory highlights the centrality of citizens’ participation in the deliberation process to generate input legitimacy for a healthy democratic system (Dahl 1971), and *informed* decision-making as an integral element of democratic citizenship (Dahl 1982: 10–11; Dahl 1989: 108–114). Healthy democracies depend on citizens’ participation (Neubauer 1967: 1002) even more so amid a global democratic decay in which safeguarding democratic norms and practices is paramount (cf. Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Consequently, informational agnostics as non-participants thereby not only undermine the potential of input legitimacy generation. They are also unlikely to defend democracy or mobilize against proponents of democracy-threatening narratives or actions, as they have concluded that they *cannot know* what is right. Unlike “misbelievers”, agnostics are not part of the polarized but have withdrawn from politics; they feel that neither what they do matters, nor can they change anything. While they might remain engaged with their personal and family lives, they share little interest in public and political affairs. Hence, informational agnostics tend no longer to have an opinion regarding the desirability of democracy. This decrease in diffuse public support for the democratic political system can endanger the system’s sustainability (Easton 1975).²¹ While agnostics may return to become part of the informed citizenry in the mid- to long-run, digital technologies make it more likely that agnostics turn into misbelievers since digital media has made it more difficult to distinguish between inaccurate and accurate information (Nisbet and Kamenchuk 2021: 576).

Citizens overwhelmed by the abundance of contradictory information might also embrace misinformation as their new truth. They resolve the stress of cognitive dissonance by embracing information that affirms preconceived worldviews and ignoring contradicting accounts – even if that entails embracing lies and ignoring facts.

While informational agnostics constitute a more silent threat to democracy, misbelievers pose a more direct one in several ways: While access to alternative sources of information is one institutional minimum for democratic rule (Dahl 1982: 10-11; Dahl 1989: 108-114), selective exposure to misinformation and counterfactual narratives subverts the reasoning behind democratic participation. Misbelievers are, therefore, likely to vote for anti-democratic parties and candidates based on inaccurate information. While their political participation might be procedurally democratic (e.g., voting), it defies the spirit of democratic participation that

²¹ For a recent empirical confirmation of the argument see Claassen (2020).

envision participation based on accurate information regarding political choices, and it can produce an impetus for anti-democratic forces that ultimately aim to dismantle democratic institutions.

Second, misbelievers can develop a deep suspicion or even aggression towards dissonant information and its proponents, whom they perceive as confounders who aggravate dissonance. This suspicion and aggression can result in misbelievers denying their political opponents' legitimacy as fellow citizens, and in extreme cases, in their stylization as enemies of the state who had best be jailed or killed. Misbelievers thus harbor attitudes that can translate into *anti-democratic insurgencies* (cf. Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: 23). This is aggravated by anti-democratic actors that tactically gear misinformation towards undermining democratic institutions and manipulate citizens to mistake democracy for dictatorship. Evidence from cases like Thailand, Germany, and the US shows that citizens can be mobilized against democracy if they mis-perceive it as dictatorial, fraudulent, unresponsive, or corrupt; they ironically seek to "save" the "real" democracy by trying to overthrow an elected democratic government (Sinpeng 2021, 165-166; Volk 2021: 13; DFR Lab 2021; Leuker et al. 2022). While anti-democratic attitudes need not *per se* lead to anti-democratic actions, scholars highlight the importance of pro-democratic attitudes for the functioning of democracies (Teorell and Hadenius 2006; Welzel and Inglehart 2019: 126). If pro-democratic attitudes are important for democracy to flourish, then digital technologies' role in the spread of anti-democratic attitudes has direct consequences for democracy.

Third, confirmation bias induced by online selective exposure jeopardizes social cohesion and exacerbates polarization (Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell 2010). Additionally, through their algorithms, social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter) might also facilitate radicalization (cf. Camargo 2020). Radical anti-democrats aggravate these radicalization processes by using mainstream social media to funnel their targets towards even less regulated websites and "alternative" social media platforms

(e.g., *BitChute*, *Gab*, *Minds*, *Parler*, or *Telegram*) to generate funds and followers and to circumvent public scrutiny (Andrews and Pym 2021). Ex-president Trump's *Truth Social*, when released in 2022, immediately topped the US social media downloads in Google's *Playstore* and Apple's *App Store* (Palmer 2022).

Even seemingly apolitical misinformation profoundly affects the overall information environment of citizens. For instance, nearly half of Americans believe that dinosaurs still exist (SWNS Staff 2021). Such misinformation contributes to what scholars have called the “post-truth era,” where people believe in starkly different accounts of reality (Suiter 2016). This deepens epistemic divides that extend far beyond the political sphere while reinforcing existing political divides about societal challenges, the best solutions, and whether to trust scientific accounts. Thus, seemingly apolitical questions are politically relevant in processes preceding democratic decay (Lipset 1959: 83; Mouffe 1999), especially since misinformation continues to influence how people think even after they have been corrected (Ecker et al. 2022).²²

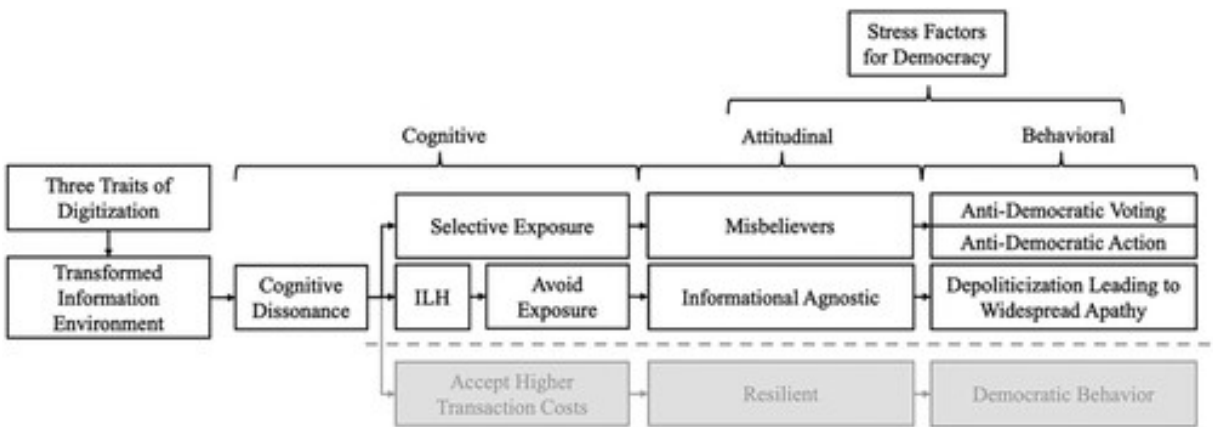
In divided societies, crises of democracy are more likely to emerge (Linz 1978: 28), and if polarization looms large, democracies are in danger (Dahl 1971: 105; Sartori 1976: 132-144). Scenarios like “gridlock and careening” or “democratic erosion or collapse” are then enabled (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). This is not only because new cleavages underlying polarization emerge (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018), which pushes the democratic party system toward the brink of “nonworkability” (Sartori 1976: 144), but also because citizens' orders of preferences transform as societal trust declines. Here, electoral choices come in again: Beyond making poor choices due to misinformation, high polarization prompts voters to “trade democratic principles for partisan interests” (Svolik 2019). Thus, when polarization and

²² The impact this has on contentious *political* issues can hardly be overestimated (e.g., whether the 2020 elections were “stolen” is a claim that more than half of Republican Party members still believe two years later).

misinformation collectively induce citizens to perceive that the social fabric has broken down, they are more likely to support authoritarian leaders (Crimston, Selvanathan, and Jetten 2022).

We have now proposed a complete causal chain that links the effects of digital technologies to political attitudes and their associated behavior, as well as their broader impacts on democratic decay, respectively; Figure 1 visualizes this causal chain. With the help of anecdotal evidence from two recent examples of anti-democratic protests that challenged two established democracies, we probe the plausibility of our theorized mechanisms.

Figure 1: Causal link between digitization and democratic decay.



5.4 Our Cases: US and Germany

Our theoretical sketch of these pathways is likely to apply in the context of a transformed informational environment at this level of abstraction, bearing in mind cross-country variations in specific structural and sub-structural conditions. Comparing the US and Germany is an important analytical exercise for several reasons. While both are established, wealthy, and representative federal democracies that have a highly educated citizenry that enjoys unfettered access to information, they are, within the universe of liberal democracies, different cases in terms of institutional arrangements, regulation of freedom of speech, digital platform regulations, and media gatekeeping mechanisms.

First, as far as democratic subtypes are concerned, majoritarian systems like those of the US are likely to foster the dominance of identity-based politics. In contrast, proportional representation systems that exist in Germany lead to more inclusive coalitions that temper partisan hostility (Lijphart 1999: 275). Second, while the American doctrine of free speech places immense faith in the ability of the individual to discern the truth where he sees it, the German approach necessitates interventions in fostering a tradition of civility and a polity of responsible citizens (Kommers 1980: 685). Third, Germany's digital regulatory framework compels social media companies to remove hate speech and other illegal content, whereas American laws provide them with thorough protection from third-party liability, as well as a general allowance for platforms to take down content voluntarily (Scheurman 2022: 418). Fifth, Germany's public media enjoys significantly more public funding than the US' highly commerce-driven media landscape, which plays a key role in containing the spread of bias that aggravates ideological extremity and partisan conflict (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018: 22). Finally, and arguably due to the differences, both countries witnessed different degrees of democratic decay (International IDEA 2021).

Despite these critical differences, very similar mechanisms challenge democracy in both cases. Specifically, AI-assisted digital communication technologies fueled doubtful attitudes and anti-democratic actions in both countries. In the US, protestors stormed Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, over misinformation surrounding voter fraud. Similarly, Germans who opposed the government's COVID policies stormed the *Reichstag* on August 29, 2020. While German anti-COVID protests were more diverse than Capitol riot protests, their common denominator is a growing portion of misinformed citizens who renounce "diffuse support" for democracy (Easton 1975: 444-447). In addition, both cases show signs of digitally aggravated apathy. In the US, one-third of eligible voters did not vote in the 2020 presidential elections (Chamie 2021). In Germany, noncompliance with the government's public health measures was

linked to people who gave up on consuming information about COVID (Siebenhaar, Köther, and Alpers 2020: 4-6).

A plausibility probe helps establish whether our framework is valid based on the extent to which it accounts for apparent empirical phenomena.²³ Using a plausibility probe, we seek to provide an initial, non-exhaustive empirical illustration of how features inherent to digitization aggravate selective exposure and ILH, which, in turn, influence beliefs and behavior dangerous to democracies. Our probe, therefore, seeks to provide an initial, non-exhaustive empirical illustration of the socio-psychological impacts that digital technologies have at the attitudinal and behavioral level before decay or breakdown becomes visible at the political regime level. The outcomes at the focus of our analysis are anti-democratic insurgencies, negative attitudes towards democratic institutions, and political apathy.²⁴

Concretely, we employ four qualitative indicators drawn from our framework to help guide our probe: (1) tailored dissemination of contradictory information to citizens with similar beliefs via recommendation algorithms; (2) the presence of self-organized users and groups on social media platforms who shape algorithmic processes by actively producing and disseminating misinformation; (3) the presence of citizens who selectively expose themselves to tailored online misinformation to gain subjective certainty. Their consumption of contradictory information are expressed via doubts towards official information in favor of dubious non-official sources of information that form a basis for subsequent engagements in anti-democratic actions (e.g. refusal to comply with decision-making processes and norms

²³ A plausibility probe is an intermediary step between hypothesis generation and hypothesis testing that allows scholars to explore the suitability of a particular case(s) as a vehicle for theory development (Levy 2008: 3).

²⁴ We used primary and secondary sources in English and German to support our probe. These include archives of digital media and statements by protesters, news reports, and scholarly works. We also used opinion surveys about citizens' perceptions of the 2020 US presidential elections and belief in COVID-related conspiracy theories in Germany.

governing representative democracies and issuing threats of armed violence against elected officials and state representatives); and (4) the presence of citizens who express a sense of helplessness in navigating the abundance of contradictory information. In contrast to the misbelievers, helpless citizens disengage altogether from forming concretely defined beliefs.

5.4.1 From “Stop the Steal” to the Steps of the Capitol

On January 6, 2021, a mob of 2,000-2,500 supporters of former US president Donald Trump stormed the Capitol building in Washington, DC as they sought to overturn President-elect Joe Biden’s victory in the 2020 presidential elections. The rioters comprised of hyper-partisan pro-Trump activists, *QAnon* conspiracy theorists, the neo-fascist *Proud Boys*, unlawful militias (e.g., *Oath Keepers*), and ideological travelers of the far-right (DFR Lab 2021). This blatant physical violation of American democracy was not a spontaneous reaction to Trump’s call but an incremental process in which its origin bears traces to digital technologies that underpin the transformed informational environment. Specifically, the combination of an abundance of contradictory information about official election results, difficulties in identifying truthful accounts, and algorithmic targeting paved the way for a militant offline mass of misbelievers.

Facebook and the digital technologies that power its platform were central to the spread of misinformation. In 2016, the company’s internal studies revealed that its algorithms and prioritization of user engagement exacerbated political polarization, such as by recommending a user to join *QAnon* - a baseless online fringe-turned-mainstream conspiracy theory that proclaimed Trump’s divine role to save the world from an evil cabal of pedophiles (Zadrozny 2021). Despite warnings before the elections (Martin 2022: 230), Facebook’s algorithms continued to recommend *QAnon* pages to old and new users (Frenkel 2020). While Facebook eventually paused its recommendations engine, it started to lift some of these control measures following the elections (Timberg, Dwoskin, and Albergotti 2021).

These algorithmic processes amplified what became the “*Stop the Steal*” narrative that consisted of three underlying arguments: (1) the expansion of mailed ballots created an opportunity for Democrats to engage in massive voter fraud; (2) Trump won the election and; (3) Trump was within his right to challenge the result and not concede, and even further, Republican legislatures and governors in states where Biden won should use their power to appoint pro-Trump electors (Drutman 2021). When Biden’s victory became clear on November 7, the narrative, coupled with the Trumpists’ *Big Lie* tale (a term that is borrowed directly from Hitler’s 1925 book *Mein Kampf*), grew in coordination with Trump’s failed legal efforts to “stop the count” of legitimate votes in various states (Drutman 2021).

The escalations among various far-right movements that culminated in the Capitol riots were linked to these algorithmically-driven filter bubbles that sustained a groundswell of selective online engagements with the *Stop the Steal* narrative. These processes did not mitigate polarization but hardened the viewpoints of many Americans who had already embarked on a path to radicalization (DFR Lab 2021). One Facebook group started by Tea Party activists Amy and Kylie Kremer, which peddled unsubstantiated accusations that the Democrats made false copies of ballots and tricked Arizona Trump supporters into using sharpies to invalidate their votes, attracted more than 360,000 members just a day after the election (Tolan 2021; Mak 2020). Initially, Facebook took “limited or no action” against election delegitimization movements and only began removing them once they had already gained traction (Mac and Frenkel 2021).

Ultimately, these online dynamics facilitated anti-democratic protests notwithstanding the protesters’ professed intentions to “save” US democracy from a perceived corrupt political establishment. Even before January 6, smaller but provocative *Stop the Steal* rallies had already mushroomed around the country, mostly in states with contested election results (Mac and Frenkel 2021). Moreover, Jacob Chansley (the “QAnon Shaman” who became the face of the

riot) is an example of how digitized informational environments can exacerbate selective exposure tendencies that result in anti-democratic behavior. On the day of the riot, he remarked,

I realized that doing my own research brought me more information than listening to the news ever could. Once I stopped allowing the news to make up my mind or my narrative for me, I grew exponentially ... I was able to take the information that I was absorbing and apply it to my activist routine (Channel 4 News 2021).

Other misbelievers who developed anti-democratic attitudes but did not physically partake in the Capitol violence can also exacerbate processes that make democratic decay visible. While many Americans rejected the claims and propositions related to *Stop the Steal*, Republican voters supported all elements of the narrative in significant numbers (Drutman 2021). Furthermore, election misinformation can confuse citizens and place them at the crossroads of either becoming misbelievers or informationally agnostic citizens. Following the elections, 10% of Americans were unsure if Trump should publicly acknowledge Biden as the legitimate president (Griffin and Quasem 2021).

Beyond selective exposure, the effects of digital technologies can also influence ILH, which increases the risk of political apathy that quietly harms democracies: about 68% of US adults said the 2020 elections were a significant source of stress in their lives (Safai 2020). Furthermore, there were indications of apathy as false claims of a stolen election became widespread. Lending initial support to our theorization that informationally agnostics retreat from information consumption to reduce costs associated with information verification, a Pew Research Center poll indicated that one-third of US respondents said that they heard “a little” about January 6 (Gramlich 2022).

5.4.2 From COVID Skepticism to the Steps of the Reichstag

The COVID-19 pandemic is the first global health crisis that has played out in the digital era, where online falsehoods can quickly go viral. The proportion of Germans who saw COVID misinformation several times a day rose from 9% in June 2020 to 17% in February 2021 (Leuker

et al. 2022: 11). While digital technologies and social media help keep people safe and informed, they also enable and amplify an “infodemic” where an abundance of contradictory information causes citizens to doubt their governments’ public health measures (World Health Organization 2020). The mainstreaming of major pandemic-related conspiracy theories that originated from the fringes of the internet was, in fact, linked to digital and AI-assisted technologies that power social media platforms (Dwoskin 2020).

One of the major COVID conspiracy narratives that managed to penetrate the European online sphere with the help of these technologies is “ID2020”. It accused Microsoft and Bill Gates of employing the pandemic as a pretext for implanting microchips to control citizens (Thomas and Zhang 2020: 2). Given that algorithms promote divisive content, high engagements by conspiracy users shaped these algorithms in ways that steered vulnerable users towards this narrative in the aftermath of the outbreak in late 2019 (Thomas and Zhang 2020: 6). By May 2020, ID2020 became one of the key terms on Twitter (Thomas and Zhang 2020: 12). Though traces of ID2020 first emerged at anti-COVID protests in the US, they also trickled their way into the German context. Between March and July 2020, around a quarter of German adults believed that Gates had more power than the government and had bought the WHO (Friedrich Naumann Stiftung 2020). In May, a famous vegan chef claimed that the federal government tried to forcibly plant mind-control chips into its citizens at the behest of Gates (Kirschbaum 2020). One doctor also accused Gates of striving for “‘pharmacological’ world domination” (Das Versteckspiel n.d.).

As ID2020 made its rounds on Twitter, the core tenets of *QAnon* evolved into an umbrella conspiracy that started to embrace anti-COVID narratives. Here, algorithmic targeting continued to amplify narratives that appealed to anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown users (Wong 2020). On YouTube, recommendation algorithms contributed to a “conspiracy boom” that included QAnon (Faddoul, Chaslot, and Farid 2020). These algorithmic processes facilitated the “trans-nationalization” of QAnon into the German online sphere, which attracts

the second largest number of followers after the US, despite stronger media gatekeeping mechanisms (Barker 2020). A number of German users were able to adapt such alt-right themes and narratives to their context and, aided by recommendation algorithms, pushed the conspiracy theory downstream. After conspiracy ideologue Oliver Janich created the first major German-language video on *QAnon* in November 2017, the video reached 90,000 views (Holnburger, Tort, and Lamberty 2022: 15). Though YouTube modified its algorithms in early 2019 (Dwoskin 2019), another German-language *QAnon* YouTube channel, *Qlobal-Change*, amassed over 17 million views by September 2020 (Barker 2020).

These effects consequently shaped anti-democratic attitudes and, in extreme cases, mobilized anti-democratic actions against the German government. The protests that transpired on August 29 in front of the *Reichstag* were a motley crew of *Querdenker* (“lateral thinkers” who are skeptical and oppose the government’s COVID measures), anti-vaxxers, *QAnon* conspiracy theorists, far-right extremists, and ordinary citizens (Brady 2020). Around 300 of these protesters stormed the building before the police eventually dispersed them. Though the violators were a subset of the 30,000 people who attended the mostly non-violent demonstration that day, digitally induced cognitive dissonance was a key driver behind their anti-democratic behavior (Brady 2020). The presence of *QAnon* signs and a portrait of Trump during the rally, as well as images of protesters chanting and promoting anti-Gates slogans such as “Don’t give Gates a chance” (Euronews 2020), suggest that selective exposure to online misinformation about COVID, which was reinforced by algorithmic targeting of *QAnon* and ID2020 content on social media, induced a misguided belief amongst protesters and sceptics that their resistance was against a supposed “COVID dictatorship” (Brady 2020; Forsa Institute 2021: 4).

Although the storming of the Reichstag represented the most visible attack on German democracy and foreshadowed what was to come for the US several months later, digitally-induced cognitive dissonance also played a quieter role in shaping anti-democratic attitudes

prior to the incident. Shortly after the first nationwide lockdown in March 2020, over 25% of Germans believed there was something else behind the pandemic than what was officially announced (Maas 2020: 27-28). Moreover, one study highlighted a positive correlation between Germans who use social media to inform themselves and the rise in pandemic-related conspiratorial beliefs, which suggests the potential of algorithmic targeting to reinforce selective exposure to misinformation (Maas 2020: 29). Ten percent of Germans reportedly started to believe in a global conspiracy, mostly in connection to Gates (Maas 2020: 28). Separate from anti-democratic attitudes and actions, signs of apathy associated with ILH also surfaced. Many Germans found distinguishing between news and fake news on the virus difficult (Friedrich Naumann Stiftung 2020). As conspiratorial narratives continued to spread, a *YouGov* poll in September 2020 provided further empirical evidence for our probe: 11% of the respondents did not know what to think about them, suggesting a degree of detachment that is in line with our theorization that, because they cannot know what is right, informationally agnostic citizens withdraw from information consumption to minimize cognitive dissonance (Suhr 2020).

5.5 Conclusion

Global democracy indices such as Freedom House, Polity, or the Bertelsmann Transformation Index tell us that democracy is globally in retreat, but the jury remains out on at least two important questions: The first is about the concrete causal mechanisms that underlie democratic decay as a domestic process. The second is to understand the reasons behind variations in the extent and nature of decay in different contexts, i.e., why do some democracies crumble more quickly and substantially than others?

This article contributes to the first debate. We argue that three features inherent to digitization alter the information environment of citizens; we illustrate how this contributes to spreading attitudes and behavior that put stress on, and thus constitute a threat to, democracy.

While our case studies empirically illustrate that these characteristics of digitization leave citizens vulnerable to misinformation and apathy, we have also drawn on established knowledge in democratic theory to show how misbelief and apathy threaten the foundations of democracy. We thus provide a novel theoretical approach to how global digitization, widespread misinformation, and challenges to democratic rule are interconnected.

These causes we hypothesize and illustrate empirically usually *precede* the adverse effects on democracy as measured by existing democracy indices and are hardly captured by the latter. This means: The state of democracy as numerically measured by commonly used indicator systems might seem identical in two given cases; yet imminent threats of the sort discussed previously may have built up in one case but not in another with identical values on “democracy” – because they are not made visible by existing indices. Thus, equal levels of stress or threats to democracy need not automatically result in similar levels of democratic decay. A diverse range of variables – apart from the ones discussed previously – can be assumed to contribute to the robustness or fragility of democratic regimes when faced with significant stress.²⁵ Here again, the cases of the US and Germany might provide a helpful comparison to uncover the variables resulting in varying degrees of decay.

Yet, the paramount issue for scholars, but also for democratic policymakers, would be to pay attention to stress on, and threats to, democracy *before* existing indices can make them visible as a manifest decay or breakdown of democratic institutions and/or procedures. We call for the development of more fine-grained instruments to be able to better assess and potentially quantify such latent stress (and for democratic decision-makers to devise policies to safeguard democracy). This emergent research agenda would also benefit from two additional endeavors. First, because informationally agnostic citizens are far less visible than misbelievers, more research is required on the former’s size, motivations, and on possible ways to turn them back

²⁵ Some of which may likely be found in the literature on democratic consolidation such as in, e.g., Merkel (2004).

into informed citizens despite the challenging information environment. Second, the analytical framework we proposed should be subjected to more systematic testing: While our plausibility probe does provide some preliminary empirical illustrations that seem to support our claims, it must not be mistaken for a rigorous effort at falsification.

Beyond complementing ongoing debates on digital technologies and democratic decay by providing much-needed theory-building and proposing concrete causal mechanisms at play, this contribution thus also offers a potentially fruitful outlook for policy-makers and academics to further discuss strategies and policies to promote societal resilience to anti-democratic trends in the digital age – politically by, e.g. enhancing information literacy or regulatory oversight over algorithmic targeting; academically by further testing our proposed mechanisms and by operationalizing the link between digitization and anti-democratic attitudes and behavior through the development of more fine-grained tools for measurement than the ones currently available.

Chapter 6

Drowning Out Dissent: The Thai Military's Quest to Fabricate Popular Support on Twitter (Article No. 2)

Abstract:

Why and how do autocracies discursively conduct digital astroturfing against their populations? As these regimes increasingly co-opt social media to manipulate online political discourse, the current political disinformation literature continues to privilege a Cold War paradigm, focusing on countries that dominate Western foreign policy priorities and concerns. Its normative underpinnings overshadow other understudied cases that have also been weaponizing social media to manipulate domestic online discourses. Concurrently, findings from ethnographic interviews and big data approaches remain theoretically disconnected from the long-held logics of regime stabilization. I argue that regime digital astroturfing follows offline events that spark online discourses with collective action potential. In countering these discourses, regime-linked digital astroturfers exploit social media affordances to discursively cheerlead the regime and devalue regime challengers to create a semblance of popular support for the former. I adopt a mixed-methods approach informed by Contextual Text Coding to examine 14,430 tweets linked to the Royal Thai Army in February 2020 to subject my central propositions to empirical scrutiny. My findings demonstrated that astroturfing efforts on Twitter throughout this period, which discursively cheerlead the military/autocratic regime of General Prayut Chan-o-cha and devalued their pro-democratic opposition with negative frames, were spurred by a mass shooting incident in the city of Korat that exposed the ruling elites to widespread online backlash. This contribution not only deepens case-specific knowledge about an understudied case in the literature, but also strengthens our understanding about the adaptations of authoritarian legitimation strategies in the digital era and the militarization of social media communication.

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6.1 The New Menu of Digital Deception

Why and how do autocratic regimes discursively conduct digital astroturfing against their populations? Autocracies have increasingly transcended the mere suppression of online criticisms to proactively subvert social media communication to manipulate online political discourse (Gunitsky 2015).²⁶ Since Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential elections (US Department of Justice 2019), there has been mounting evidence of digital astroturfing in autocracies in the Global South (Bradshaw and Howard 2019; Jones 2022). Falling under the purview of image management, these regimes have created legions of so-called "cyber troops" that masquerade as ordinary, autonomous individuals in disseminating online information to create a semblance of popular support for the regime and resentment for its challengers (Kovic et al. 2018; Bradshaw and Howard 2019). Whether government-run or outsourced (DiResta et al. 2022), regime-linked actors exploit social media's relative anonymity to shape the public's positive identification with autocratic rule (King et al. 2017).

Notwithstanding significant empirical advances in political disinformation research that demonstrate autocracies' abilities to exploit properties of a complex hybrid media system to legitimize their rule (see Chadwick 2017; Xia et al. 2019; King et al. 2017; Bradshaw et al. 2022), the current literature suffers from two major shortcomings. The first is theoretical: while ethnographic interviews and big data approaches (e.g., topic modeling and sentiment analysis) have provided substantial insight into the organizational structures of digital astroturfing campaigns and the discursive elements of these deceptive activities (Ong and Cabañes 2019; Xia et al. 2019; Stanford Internet Observatory 2020), these findings remain disconnected from the long-held logics of regime stabilization and survival (cf. Gerschewski 2013; cf.

²⁶ Autocracies are regimes with highly concentrated and unchecked power where opponents outside the small core of ruling elites are excluded from executive decision-making. See, for example, Linz (1964) and Geddes (1999). These core traits have motivated much theorizing on authoritarianism. This article therefore uses the terms autocracy and authoritarianism interchangeably.

Schlumberger et al. 2023). The theory presented here offers a causal logic for why we should pay closer attention to regime threat perception: it reveals valuable information about the stressors confronting a given regime, which, in turn, shape regime choices about digital astroturfing. The second is normative. Because the current literature privileges a Cold War paradigm, the fixation on revisionist autocracies like Russia and China overshadows other countries that have also weaponized social media to manipulate domestic online discourses (Jones 2022: 7-8).

Drawing on insights from research on collective action potential, this article employs a theoretical framework that situates authoritarian digital astroturfing through the lens of regime threat perception. My argument is twofold. First, regime digital astroturfing follows offline events that spark online discourses with collective action potential. Because of the underdeveloped institutional mechanisms for accommodating grievances that typically characterize autocratic rule (Mason 2004: 275), events like natural disasters, mass shootings, and political scandals can spark online collective expressions that have the potential to mobilize real-world protest formation and related activities that threaten regime stability (King et al. 2013: 2). Second, in countering these discourses, regime-linked digital astroturfers exploit social media affordances to discursively cheerlead the regime and devalue regime challengers to create a semblance of popular support for the former.

To illustrate these propositions, I adopt a micro-approach informed by Contextual Text Coding (CTC) to systematically code 14,430 tweets linked to the Royal Thai Army (RTA) in February 2020 based on their discursive tactics and frames embedded in them (Lichtenstein and Rucks-Ahidiana 2021). While recent data disclosures and Thailand-centric research have illustrated the broader tactical and discursive strategies of RTA digital astroturfing operations on platforms like Twitter and Facebook under the military government of General Prayut Chan-o-cha, they remain largely limited to exploratory data analysis and small-N qualitative analyses

(cf. Sombatpoonsiri 2018; cf. Goldstein et al. 2020).²⁷ My micro-approach builds on this empirical knowledge and offers an in-depth, large-N qualitative study of textual data to highlight the types of tweet tactics and discursive frames that RTA-linked assets promoted, as well as linking the results to the broader theoretical construct of regime threat perception to illustrate an important causal factor driving these tweeting patterns.

My findings provide initial empirical support for my propositions. On February 8, 2020, an army sergeant wronged by his commanding officer committed a mass shooting in the city of Korat, which sparked widespread public backlash against the ruling elites. This incident prompted army-linked assets on Twitter to intensify their discursive campaigns to defend the army and the Prayut government while discrediting pro-democracy politicians over the course of the month. These digital astroturfers extensively cheerlead the regime, particularly by discursively repairing civil-military relations through praiseworthy comments and selective retweets of pro-army and pro-government content. Concurrently, they also exploited the same platform affordances to discursively devalue and discredit its main political challenger, the Future Forward Party (FFP).

This article provides three important contributions that address noticeable gaps in the political disinformation literature. First, my framework shows how situating traces of regime digital astroturfing through the lens of regime threat perception generates *ex ante* expectations about when the strategy might be adopted. Second, because tweets are convulsed forms of data, a qualitative data-driven probe of trace data allows us to extract different types of grounded meaning concerning the tactical and discursive qualities of army-linked tweets that automated outputs overlook. Qualitative coding allows researchers to obtain deep, textured, and contextualized understandings of these tweets (Nelson 2020: 5; Tanweer et al. 2021: 14),

²⁷ The Prayut regime transitioned from a military dictatorship to an electoral authoritarian regime in 2019 and remained in power until 2023.

thereby increasing nuance, interpretability, and recognition that they are shaped by the autocrat's domestic threat environment. Finally, the choice of Thailand as a single case study answers increasing calls to expand the study of political disinformation beyond the Cold War paradigm (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2022: 52), thus providing updated empirical insights for an understudied case in the literature and further informing theory-building about the relationship between collective action potential and regime digital astroturfing.

This article consists of seven parts. The next section situates authoritarian digital astroturfing through the lens of regime threat perception vis-à-vis collective action potential. The third discusses how digital astroturfers discursively construct appearances of regime support and resentment of its challengers. The fourth introduces RTA-linked digital astroturfing under the Prayut government as a case study. The fifth explains my data collection and coding processes informed by the CTC approach. The sixth presents the quantitative results and a targeted qualitative analysis of the coded tweets. Finally, I discuss my findings' implications for understanding autocratic legitimation in the digital age and the militarization of social media communication – two pertinent issues that straddle the fields of political communication and digital authoritarianism.

6.2 Regime Digital Astroturfing as a Response to the Perceived Threat of Collective Action Potential

A central assumption in the authoritarianism literature posits that political survival is a key objective of autocrats. Scholars have focused on the ways they, as rational actors, adopt a variety of strategies, including repression, co-optation, and legitimation to ensure regime stability in the face of domestic threats (Gerschewski 2013; Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014; Schlumberger et al. 2023).

A great deal of existing research on contentious politics shows how mass protests can become a death knell for even the most well-entrenched autocracies (Lynch 2012; Geddes et

al. 2014). Rulers are wary not just about these events in and of themselves, but also individuals who can lead discussions that initiate them (King et al. 2013: 2; Koesel and Bunce 2011). The rise of social media platforms, which create more interpersonal communications between different receivers that lead to information sharing at significantly greater speed and volume (Liang 2018: 528), presents a dilemma for autocrats. While these tools create an alternative avenue of persuasion that enhances authoritarian image management (Dukalskis 2021), they also enable regime challengers to bypass traditional media gatekeepers to promote their alternative political visions, thus initiating and sustaining political discussions about their governments that enhance collective action potential (Diamond 2010; Howard and Hussain 2013; Bennett and Segerberg 2011; Hamdy 2010; Hamdy and Gomaa 2012; Lim 2012).

Collective action potential refers to collective expression – many people communicating on social media on the same subject – about actual collective action (e.g., protests) and about events that seem likely to generate collective action but have not yet done so (King et al. 2013). Most autocracies routinely grapple with dissent and contentious actions that challenge the foundational ideological justification that legitimizes their claims to power (Schedler 2018: 47). Discourses with collective action potential, however, not only challenge hegemonic narratives but also facilitate the mobilization of anti-regime protests that have led to autocratic breakdowns in some cases (Shao 2018; Lim 2012; Matsilele and Ruhanya 2020). Thus, we should expect the regime to employ digital astroturfing to manage online discourses with collective action potential. King et al.'s (2017) research on digital astroturfing in China provides empirical support for this intuition: Government-linked trolls on Weibo increased their social media activities and shifted topics during moments of social unrest.

While collective action potential is not always easily observable for the regime (Kuran 1991), scholars have developed useful indicators to help determine *ex ante* where perceived fears of collective action potential in the online sphere are likely to motivate regime response. Rulers may infer the level of collective action potential from the relative strength of the political

opposition, such as the latter's ability to organize protests or the number of votes they receive during an election (Steinert 2023: 354).²⁸ In the digital era, regime challengers have also relied on social media platforms to mobilize citizens based on structural and/or incidental grievances.²⁹ King et al. (2018) observed that Chinese citizens can write the most vitriolic blog posts about even the top Chinese leaders without fear of censorship, but if they write in support of an ongoing protest – or even about a rally in favor of a popular policy or leader – they will be censored. Relatedly, Martin et al. (2023: 874) noted that the first domestic influence effort in Russia began in 2011, when protests in the country catalyzed the creation of a pro-Kremlin trolling force.

While authoritarian management of public discourses with high collective action potential is expected since legitimation is crucial for the maintenance of regime stability,³⁰ the nature of digital astroturfing is novel and significant as social media platforms become increasingly vulnerable to political manipulation by anti-democratic actors with access to manpower, computing power, and material resources. These deceptive activities are characterized by the appropriation of digital personas that grant operators – be they government-run operations executed by state organs (e.g., military and intelligence services) or outsourced operations conducted by contractors or citizen troll armies (DiResta et al. 2021) – anonymity in the online sphere (Xia et al. 2019). This relative anonymity impedes internet users' abilities to distinguish between genuine behaviors and inauthentic coordinated behaviors. Thus, the regime can disguise state-linked actors as “credibility cues” to serve its stabilization goals (Chadwick and Stanyer 2022: 11-12). Bulut and Yörük (2017) found that Twitter trolls in Turkey hired by the Justice Development Party demonized protesters during the Gezi Park

²⁸ See also Deng (1989).

²⁹ See Bray et al. 2018 for discussions on structural and incidental grievances.

³⁰ Legitimation refers to the process by which rulers seek to guarantee active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population (Gerschewski 2013: 18).

demonstrations in 2013. In Thailand and the Philippines, government-run and outsourced trolls have also been deployed to support authoritarian leaders in the respective countries (Sombatpoonsiri 2018; Ong and Cabañes 2019).

6.3 How Digital Astroturfers Manipulate Online Discourses with Collective Action Potential

Three common discursive tactics that digital astroturfers adopt to manipulate online discourses in favor of the ruling elites can be derived from current research on political disinformation and digital authoritarianism: cheerleading, devaluation, and hoax spreading (King et al. 2017; Wong and Liang 2021; Goldstein et al. 2020; DiResta et al. 2021). First, cheerleading refers to organized efforts aimed at amplifying information that promotes and/or defends the regime; it entails the dissemination of legitimizing messages that encompass the creation of positive, beneficial, or ethical justifications to make the regime's actions or views acceptable (see Igwebuike and Chimunya 2020: 46; see von Soest and Grauvogel 2017: 3-5). Second, devaluation refers to the amplification of information that discredits political opponents and critics; it entails the dissemination of delegitimizing messages that create negative, unethical, or immoral justifications to render the actions and views of regime challengers as unacceptable (see Igwebuike and Chimunya 2020: 46; see Edel and Josua 2018). Third, hoaxes are specific kinds of disinformation that contain deliberately false information made to masquerade as facts (Loveless 2021: 66). Scholars have, for instance, observed that Russian propaganda aims to create an information environment where the (objective) truth feels unknowable (Bradshaw et al. 2022; DiResta 2021).³¹ This includes peddling conspiracy theories that the United States had shot down Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine in a botched attempt to target Putin's personal jet (Pomerantsev 2015).

³¹ See also Pomerantsev (2015).

These discursive tactics are borne out of complex usages of social media affordances, that is, their interactivity features (Barrie and Siegel 2021). For example, Twitter has addressivity markers like “RT” (retweet), “#” (hashtag), and “@” (mentions/direct comments). While “@” allows users to express their thoughts on posts linked to the source account, RT allows them to repost certain content across and beyond peer networks (Honeycutt and Herring 2009: 1; Meraz and Papacharissi 2013: 144). Because social media companies seek to enhance their platforms’ values with design structures and incentives that increase a given content’s visibility (Van Dijck and Poell 2013: 6-9), algorithmic processes tend to popularize morally and emotionally evocative content regardless of whether they are factually true or not (Berger and Milkman 2012; Van Bavel et al. 2024). The combination of this popularity logic and addressivity markers, which heighten the relevancy of certain actors and certain content (Van Dijck and Poell 2013; Meraz and Papacharissi 2013: 144), enables regime-linked digital astroturfers to become agents of influence capable of manipulating online discourses by selectively flooding social media feeds with pro-regime posts.

Selective reposts and direct comments particularly aid discursive framing efforts that seek to “thematically reinforce clusters of facts, judgments, or beliefs” about the regime and its political rivals and other domestic challengers (Entman 1993: 52). By amplifying messages that align with hegemonic narratives dictated from above (Dukalskis 2017: 142), they drown out alternative political narratives and reinforce the regime’s legitimating claims even if people may not fully believe them (Dukalskis 2017: 26-29). Again, the Twitter trolls in Turkey hired by the Justice Development Party offer an illustrative example: They employed populist communication that extolled the Erdogan government’s provision of public services while demonizing the Gezi Park protesters (Bulut and Yörük 2017: 4104-4108). Similarly, Singapore’s ruling People Action Party established “internet brigades” to “soft sell” the government’s controversial policies (Tan 2020: 1076).

6.4 Case Selection: RTA-linked Digital Astroturfing on Twitter Under the Prayut Government

I adopt a single in-depth case study of RTA-linked digital astroturfing on Twitter under the military/autocratic regime of General Prayut Chan-o-cha to subject my central propositions to empirical scrutiny and to broaden our understandings of these operations in autocratic contexts beyond the Cold War paradigm. I chose to focus on the RTA because it is a military institution that is embedded in Thai politics (Kongkirati and Kanchoochat 2018). As military spending surged under the Prayut government (Punthong 2024: 142), the army's online activities also became more proactive and penetrating. RTA units like the Internal Security Operations Command assumed authority over cyber surveillance (Pawakapan 2021: 3). The RTA also exhibited an in-house capacity to conduct digital astroturfing against the local population (Goldstein et al. 2020; Sombatpoonsiri 2022).³² Several leaked internal documents also suggested that RTA employed 17,000 individuals to create and share disinformation, including training its personnel to avoid Twitter bans (Freedom House 2022).

Additionally, there are two important *prima facie* pieces of evidence of collective action potential in the Thai digital sphere – particularly on Twitter – that further make RTA-linked digital astroturfing an illuminating case study of how a government institution, that is, the military, can weaponize social media platforms to shape online political discussions amidst public backlash against the regime. This evidence is borne out by the country's relatively higher internet freedom in comparison to other autocratic regimes and the strength of the political opposition.

In terms of internet freedom, Thailand – despite becoming a “closed autocracy” under Prayut's rule – still enjoyed higher internet freedom than other closed autocracies in Asia such as China, Myanmar, and Vietnam, and even higher than electoral autocracies like Venezuela

³² See also Prachatai (2021).

and Russia (Freedom House 2020: 31). To date, young Thai citizens on Twitter have used the platform to not only discuss their entertainment interests, including K-pop, Thai-pop, and Thai evening soap opera television shows, but also to explore controversial and political topics (Sinpeng 2021: 196). This relative internet freedom enabled regime challengers – particularly young pro-democracy supporters – to use openness and relative anonymity of Twitter to challenge the Prayut regime’s nationalist-royalist ideology that centers on the supremacy of nationalism, monarchism, and Theravada Buddhism as the foundation of Thai national identity (Sinpeng 2021; Dressel 2010; Sombatpoonsiri 2020: 110-111). After Prayut seized power from the democratically elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra in May 2014, student activists were at the forefront of offline and online pro-democracy activism, including initiating critical discussions about the monarchy, human rights abuses, and alleged corruption scandals (Lertchoosakul 2022). One-third of the most popular Twitter hashtags in 2020 were related to anti-government protest activities that included calls for monarchy reform (Sinpeng 2021: 196). This led General Apirat Kongsompong, then RTA commander-in-chief, to frame social media as a site of “hybrid warfare” that allowed critics to spread “fake news” and “propaganda” about the military and the monarchy (Matichon TV 2019).³³

Second, while Prayut successfully retained power after the 2019 general elections, pro-democracy supporters managed to push the political party they supported to third place (McCargo 2019: 91). The popularity of FFP, a newly formed anti-regime political party in 2018 that advocated for the demilitarization of Thai politics and monarchy reform, accentuated the regime’s perceived threat of collective action potential. FFP began to use Twitter to mobilize support among the youth before the 2019 election, which allowed many first-time voters to use the platform to speak their minds about the military’s tight grip on Thai politics

³³ V-DEM Institute (2023: 26) also reported a rise in government-linked disinformation in Thailand between 2012 and 2022.

(Lawattanatrakul 2019). After finishing third with more 6.2 million popular votes in the 2019 general elections, FFP quickly became the main target of political repression and delegitimization before it was dissolved in February 2020 (McCargo 2019: 99).³⁴ In October 2020, Twitter independently disclosed 21,385 tweets from 926 fake accounts linked to the RTA which extensively praised the military and the monarchy while attacking FFP (Twitter 2020a; Goldstein et al. 2020).

6.5 Data and Method

My research design adopts a mixed-methods approach to preserve context-specific results for a large-N study of textual data (Lichtenstein and Rucks-Ahidiana 2021). I downloaded Twitter metadata (e.g., user account information, tweet, and tweet date and time) from its “Hashed Information Operations Archive” and selected a total of 14,430 tweets that the company flagged in February 2020 for my examination (Twitter 2020b).³⁵ Compared to other time periods in the archived dataset, this month alone recorded more than one-third (67.5%) of the total tweets in the disclosure, that is, 21,385 tweets. The high frequency of tweets coincided with widespread public backlash following the mass shooting incident in the city of Korat on February 8. The fact that the perpetrator was an army sergeant enhanced FFP’s calls for military reform. Additionally, the tweets also expanded to cover other social and political topics including the spread of the COVID-19 virus, threats to human security including drought and wildfires in northern Thailand, controversies involving FFP (e.g., financial loans made to the party from its leader and one of the party’s senior members’ admission to overstaying in an army residential unit, the constitutional court’s decision to dissolve FFP, and the youth-led pro-

³⁴ See also Bangkok Post (2020a).

³⁵ The archived dataset spans from October 2015 to July 2020. Metadata such as user ID were hashed by Twitter for data privacy reasons.

democracy protests against the verdict). The varying themes and events during this month, therefore, offer a rich opportunity to interpret meaning and connect ideas that appear unrelated on the surface (Tanweer et al. 2021: 16) – that is, in the context of this study, how the discursive elements of RTA-linked digital astroturfing bore traces to the regime’s perceived threat of online discourses with collective action potential.

While this disclosure may be a small fraction of RTA-linked digital astroturfing activities on Twitter since operatives go to great lengths to hide their tracks (which may partly explain why only 926 accounts of the 17,000 army-linked operatives were detected) (Goldstein and Grossman 2021), the Thailand dataset contains the most credible and expansive trace data linked to a governmental actor available to date. While attribution problems are well-established (Iramine et al. 2020),³⁶ Twitter nevertheless has access to trace data including IP addresses and device IDs to detect digital astroturfing activities (DiResta et al. 2022: 230). Further, the company became increasingly specific in their attributions (i.e., not just to a country, but to a specific governmental actor) from 2018 to 2020 thanks to collaborations with journalists and civil society groups to expose them (Goldstein and Grossman 2021). In this regard, Twitter may have likely selected accounts based on information from FFP. The disclosure came eight months after a censure debate in late February 2020 where former FFP member of parliament Wiroj Lakkana-adisorn accused the Prayut government and the army of systematically disseminating propaganda on social media platforms (Thai Enquirer 2020).

Once I downloaded these tweets, I divided my coding process into three phases: identification of variables, development of a coding ontology, and implementation of the ontology. The ontology – iteratively developed in several stages using inductive and deductive reasoning – cast a wide net on the range of tactical orientations and associated valence frames to illustrate my central propositions. First, I examined a random 10 percent sample of tweets

³⁶ See also Matsakis (2017).

from February 2020 (n=1,143) via an open, inductive coding to ground my intuition. This process allowed distinctive categories related to their tactical orientation and frames to emerge from the data. I further revised the categories against Edel and Josua's (2018: 884) "endangered values vs. harmful behavior" categories to account for additional frames. In total, four distinct tactical orientations and sixteen distinct, thematically cohesive valence frames were formally established.

Second, I developed operational definitions and coding parameters for each variable in the ontology: *tweet_tactic*, positive or negative valence frames (e.g., *pos_national_unity* and *neg_division_society*), *account_interaction_ID*, and *account_type* (See Supplementary Information File, Appendix A, for the full set of discursive frames). Numerical values were used to best represent a tweet's tactical orientation and associated frame(s). For *tweet_tactic*, coders chose from three ideal types of tactics derived from previous theoretical discussions and open coding: *Cheerlead* (1), *Devalue* (2), and *Hoax spreading* (3). Tweets that deviate from these three ideal types are considered "noisy" data, that is, data that contain errors (e.g., broken links and content suspended by Twitter) or irrelevant features (e.g., horoscopes, popular culture references like K-pop, jokes, and commercial content like advertisements). These tweets are coded as *Engage* (4). For each of the positive and negative frames established by the open coding process, coders entered a 1 or 0 depending on whether a tweet invokes them. Tweets that deviated from coding parameters were marked with an asterisk next to their value. Additional variables like *account_interaction_id* and *account_interaction_type* required textual elaborations to understand the nature of the accounts that RTA-linked digital astroturfers interacted with, such as their affiliations or known/inferred political leanings. These details reveal the communities around which these operations were organized, which, in turn, allows us to identify subsets of data for targeted qualitative analysis to enhance the contextualization of quantitative results. Furthermore, I created a notes column (i.e., *notes_translation*) for each tweet to document relevant context-specific knowledge, coding decisions, and interesting

observations (e.g., deviations from coding parameters) to promote reflexivity in the coding process (Tanweer et al. 2021: 17).

Third, I implemented the coding ontology and hand-coded all 14,430 tweets to track both quantitative and qualitative data. Though computer-assisted coding offers a less time- and labor-intensive technique to analyze large-scale text-based datasets, the problems with decontextualization with this approach are well-established (Lichtenstein and Rucks-Ahidiana 2021; Tanweer et al. 2021). Even if researchers can engage in pre-training, embedding, and fine-tuning for complex text classification for low-resource programming languages such as Thai, machine learning underperforms in nuanced portrayals of a topic (Nelson et al. 2018: 221). It also misclassifies linguistically similar but conceptually different codes when compared to hand-coding that enables more context-sensitive readings of the data (Lichtenstein and Rucks-Ahidiana 2021: 612). The challenges of coding the diverse types of accounts RTA-linked digital astroturfers interacted with, tweets that contain tweets or those that deviate from the ontology (e.g., when astroturfers praise or agree with regime opponents) make hand-coding better suited to capture these complexities in the dataset.

Additionally, I recruited and trained two native-Thai speakers on the codebook to build a consensus on coding protocols and thus limit randomness in responses. They familiarized themselves with the major social and political topics in February 2020, conducted five rounds of practice tests, and collaboratively discussed and reconciled coding differences. Finally, they independently applied the codebook on 1 percent of a randomly selected sub-sample of tweets (n=146) in a test of intercoder reliability (ICR).³⁷ Calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient, the results indicated a near-perfect agreement. *Tweet tactic* scored 9 percent, and each

³⁷ While scholars suggest sub-sample between 10% and 25% to be re-analyzed by independent coders before conducting an ICR test (See O'Connor and Joffe 2020: 5), the author did not have the funding capacity to reach the suggested amount and therefore acknowledge potential sampling error.

associated discursive frame, except for *Praiseworthy* (84%), scored above 90 percent (See Supplementary Information File, Appendix B).

Finally, I subjected all the coded tweets to three sets of analysis. The first and second sets entailed quantitative analyses of the compiled data, quantizing the coding. I first used Gephi, a cloud-based visualization and network metric analysis software, to locate highly connected node groups coded in the *account_interaction_id* column.³⁸ Network visualization helps illustrate the most prevalent Twitter accounts and communities that RTA-linked digital astroturfers interacted with. Subsequently, I used descriptive statistics and tabulations based on counts of each categorical variable to highlight the most prevalent tweet tactics and their associated discursive frames in the dataset. Lastly, based on these quantitative trends, I conducted a targeted, context-sensitive qualitative analysis of the same data sources to offer a granular empirical illustration of why and how the Prayut regime discursively conducted digital astroturfing against its populations.

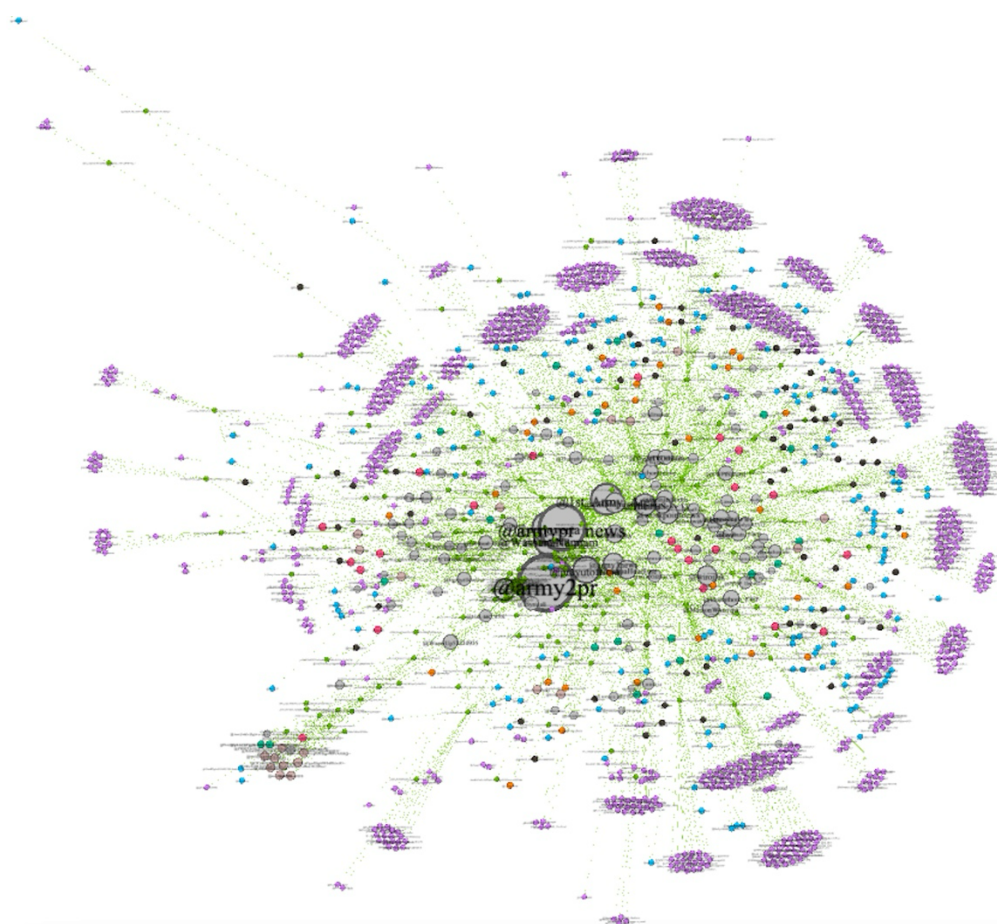
6.6 Results

Public relations accounts of different RTA units, particularly @armypr_news, @1st_Army_Area, and @ARMRY4PR, collectively represented the largest node category with high incoming ties (n=4,194) (See Figures 1 and 2). Other key node categories included anti-regime politician (n=958), anti-regime political party (n=209), anti-regime user (n=1,647), and pro-regime user (n=2,088) (See Supplementary Information File, Appendix A, for the full description of these actors). In addition, The Standard (n=196), Voice TV Official (n=149), and Thai Rath News (n=85) were the top three news outlets (n=1,997) that the digital astroturfers

³⁸ This is based on in-degree centrality, that is, the number of incoming links to an account (See Cherven 2018). For this set, there is no need to write scripts to visualize and explore network statistics since Gephi's user interface is highly configurable and provides a toolbox of statistical graph measures.

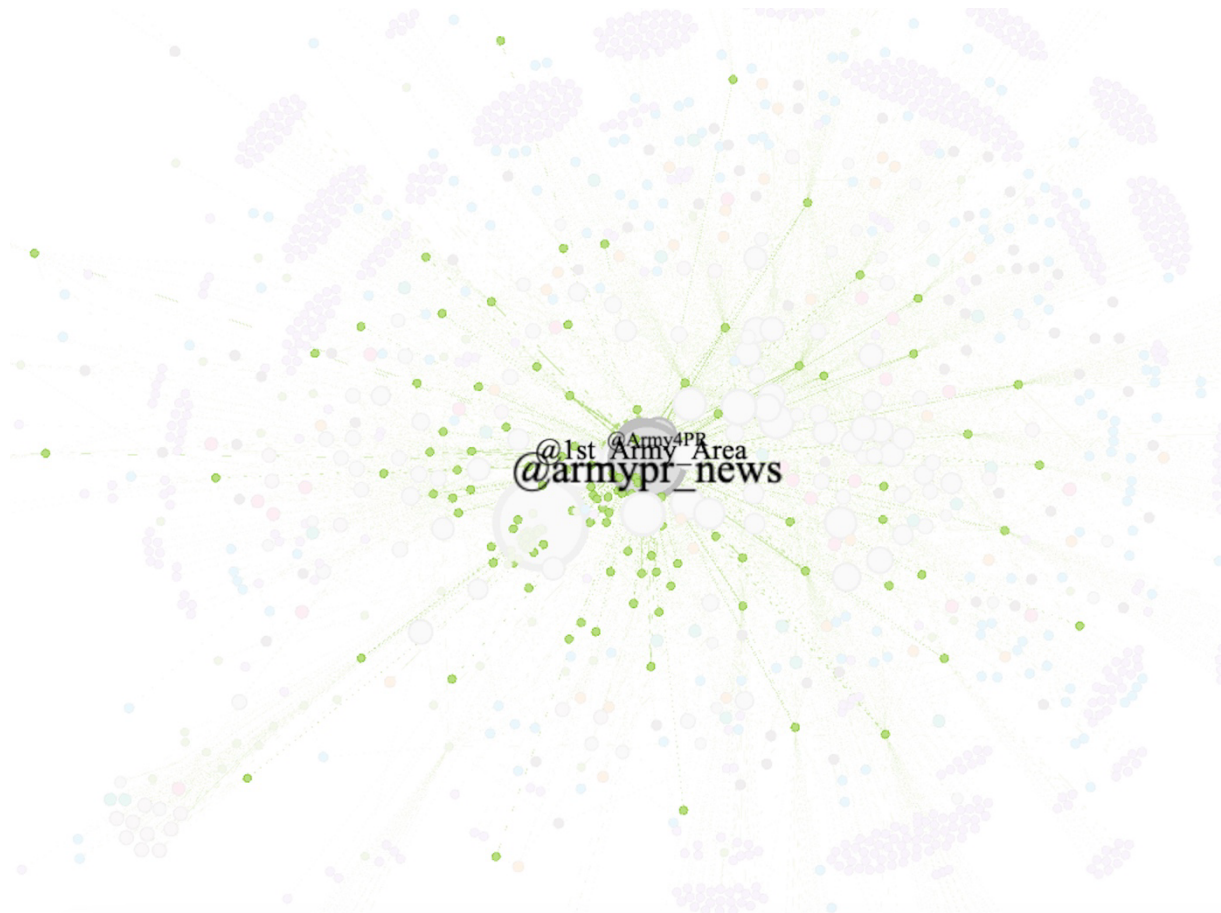
interacted with to promote positive stories about the army and the Prayut government. The Standard and Voice TV are online news outlets critical of the military, while Thai Rath appeals more to mainstream Thai-speaking audiences.³⁹ Among journalists, they typically interacted with Wassana Nanuam (n=697), who is typically known for her reporting on military-related affairs.

Figure 1: Networks of RTA-linked digital astroturfing.



³⁹ Voice TV ceased operations in April 2024.

Figure 2: RTA-linked digital astroturfing assets that interacted with army public relations accounts.



Cheerleading tweets represented 52 percent of the tweets in the dataset. From retweeting stories about the RTA’s COVID-19 monitoring operations along the Thai-Cambodian border (n=28) to Prayut’s vision for a “smart” public transport system in Bangkok (n=10), these tweets tried to promote the army and the Prayut government’s performance outputs and superior leadership qualities. The comments that typically accompanied these retweets were not based on rational argumentation; they were positive affective expressions that tried to create an empathetic bond with the army and the Prayut government by offering praise and motivation (e.g., “Keep fighting” and “Protecting and serving the people. Amazing. Sacrificing your free time for the people”). In fact, *Praiseworthy* was the most dominant

discursive frame associated with retweets and comments in the *Cheerleading* (n=3,133) category, followed by *National Unity* (n=2,531) and *Public Security* (n=2,390) (See Table 1). These three frames were commonly associated with retweets of stories about army soldiers providing services and protection to Thai citizens amidst incidents that threatened their livelihoods (e.g., mass shooting, wildfires, and droughts). To amplify impressions of popular support for the army, digital astroturfers retweeted these posts with praises for the troops, such as “@armypr_news Containing wildfires #armyforthepeople” and “@3_INFANTRY_DIV @siharatdecho This is what they call the soldiers of the people.”⁴⁰

Table 1: Distribution of positive discursive frames, from most frequent to least frequent

(Note: Irregular tweets are not included in these counts).

Frame	Associated tweet tactic	Count (n)
Praiseworthy	Cheerleading	3,133
National unity	Cheerleading	2,541
Public security	Cheerleading	2,390
Stability and progress	Cheerleading	761
Truthfulness	Cheerleading	566
History, tradition, sovereignty	Cheerleading	255
Defense of institutions and values	Cheerleading	150
Legality	Cheerleading	119

By contrast, digital astroturfers employed *Devalue* tweets (17.4 percent) to harass the Prayut regime’s pro-democracy rivals by framing them as morally inferior, felonious, and less competent actors whose ideological aspirations threaten the established political order. *Disgrace* was the most dominant discursive frame associated with this tactical category

⁴⁰ The former tweet is a direct comment to @armypr_news’s post about the *Thahan Phran* (an RTA auxiliary unit) border guards’ mission to extinguish wildfires in Chiang Mai Province. The latter tweet is a direct comment to @3_INFANTRY_DIV’s post about the army’s so-called “Big Cleaning Day” event at the Thao Suranaree Monument in Korat to honor the victims of the mass shooting. @siharatdecho is a pro-regime user.

(n=2,025) (See Table 2). These tweets mostly discredited FFP politicians and their supporters by insulting their individual abilities, integrity, charisma, intellect, and influence. The accounts of the party's executive members, such as Thanathorn Jungruangrungit, Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, and Pannika Wanich were – compared to other anti-regime politicians – the primary targets of *Devalue* tweets. For instance, *Devalue* tweets that targeted Pannika were forty-two times higher than Pheu Thai's Teerarat Samretwanich (n=1), although both were elected female MPs from parties that opposed military rule. For example, army-linked digital astroturfers accused Pannika of bringing chaos to the country, framed her as a liar, and expressed joy in her party's setbacks. Depending on the issue, some of the *Devalue* tweets directed at FFP contained more than one negative frame in a single tweet. For instance, these assets combined *Disgrace* and *Transgression* frames to accuse FFP of being so-called “nation haters” – a common trope that conservative Thais use to accuse the party of subverting the nationalist-royalist political order (see also Sombatpoonsiri 2022).

Contrary to findings from other contexts, like Russia, where online trolls propagated several hoaxes in the US and Europe (Prier 2017: 67),⁴¹ there was not a single instance of *Hoax spreading* by RTA-linked digital astroturfers in February 2020. There was, however, a small portion of tweets that deviated from the coding parameters (1 percent), notably tweets that expressed agreements with statements of the Prayut regime's political rivals and critics (n=173). Among these tweets were retweets of FFP politicians' posts that expressed condolences and sadness about the Korat mass shooting, as well as retweets of several anti-regime users' praise of the government security forces' efforts to resolve the crisis. These tweeting patterns are functional to the regime's official narrative of solidarity and efforts to restore the image of the army as the guardian of the public instead of being the cause of the incident (Bangkok Post 2020b). Lastly, *Engage* tweets represented 29 percent of the tweets in the tactical category.

⁴¹ See also Chen (2015).

While many of the seemingly mundane tweets in this category (e.g., posts about horoscopes and pop culture) are considered “noisy” data because their meanings cannot be easily interpreted and nor are their frames as discernible as the other tactical categories derived from the literature, the lack of informativeness may arguably constitute a form of “anticipatory obfuscation” that helps operatives masquerade themselves as autonomous individuals in order to avoid Twitter bans (Heavey et al. 2020: 1503-1504; Xia et al. 2019).

Table 2: Distribution of negative discursive frames, from most frequent to least frequent

(Note: Irregular tweets are not included in these counts).

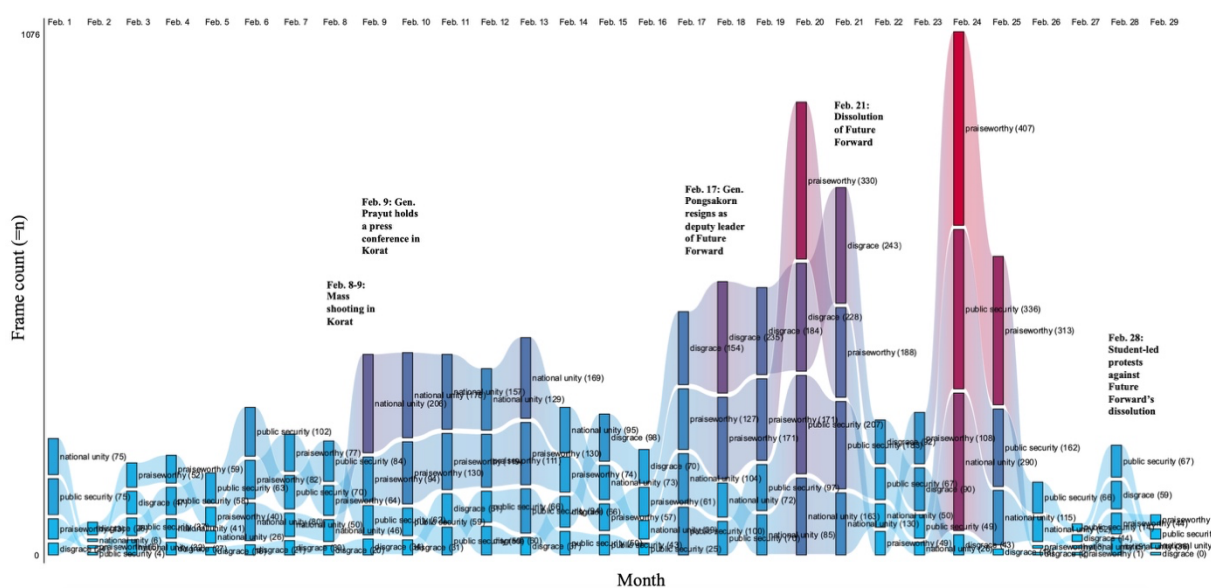
Frame	Associated tweet tactic	Count (n)
Disgrace	Devalue	2,025
Dishonesty	Devalue	374
Criminal behavior	Devalue	344
Division of society	Devalue	232
Transgression	Devalue	143
Regression	Devalue	70
Public disruption	Devalue	43
Foreign influence	Devalue	16

6.6.1 Early February: Drowning out Public Criticisms after the Korat Mass Shooting

The distribution of valence frames in February 2020 followed offline events in Thai social and political life that sparked online discourses with collective action potential (See Figure 3). Not only did these discourses pose a challenge to regime image management, but they also enhanced the ability of pro-democracy parties to cultivate popularity. In particular, FFP was adept at using social media to challenge the nationalist-royalist ideology that underpins the established political order (Sinpeng 2021: 196). On February 8 – just one week into the month – 32-year-old RTA sergeant major Jakrapanth Thomma stole weapons from an army barracks near Korat before driving into the city center to shoot at unarmed civilians. After an extended gunfight that lasted almost twenty-four hours, Jakrapanth was shot dead by government security forces. His rampage resulted in twenty-nine fatalities and fifty-eight

injuries (BBC 2020). It was later revealed that Jakrapanth was hoodwinked by his commanding officer in a private property deal (BBC 2020). The mass shooting, which was the first of its kind in Thailand, sparked widespread public backlash against the army leadership and the Prayut government (BBC 2020). As the hashtags “Reform the Military” and “PrayuthRIP” started trending on Twitter, anti-regime parties led by FFP and Pheu Thai renewed their calls for increasing the army’s transparency and accountability (The Bangkok Insight 2020; Zsombor 2020).

Figure 3: The shifting discursive elements of RTA-linked digital astroturfing operations in response to domestic offline events.



In the week prior to the crisis, as Figure 3 shows, *Cheerleading* and *Devalue* tweets were already in use to promote the army and to devalue FFP, respectively. However, there was an enormous spike in digital astroturfing tweets after February 8 (see also Goldstein et al. 2020: 9). In particular, RTA-linked assets intensified their propagation of *Cheerleading* tweets to discursively foster concordance between the government, the army, and the Thai people.

National Unity was the most predominant frame associated with this tactical category, which included retweets of posts related to Prayut's expression of condolences, his official visit to Korat, and statements about the government's efforts to provide financial assistance to the victims' families (See Figure 3). Several assets retweeted the following post from Prayut's official Twitter account: "RT @prayutofficial: I feel sorry for this great loss like all Thai people in the country. I would like to join and mourn for the victims alongside the people of Korat and all the people of Thailand. We are all saddened by what happened, and today I extend my support to everyone." They also repeatedly commented on posts by Prayut's official account, RTA public relations accounts (e.g., @armypr_news and @1st_Army_Area), and mainstream news outlets (e.g., @PostToday) with expressions of condolences, regret, and moral support for the victims' families. Repetitive comments like "I give you my support and pray you are all safe" and "We need to support each other" discursively reinforce the regime's official narrative of national solidarity amidst public backlashes.

Digital astroturfers initially refrained from devaluing FFP. Instead, their retweets of FFP politicians' messages of condolences were accompanied by comments that included, for example, "@Thanathorn_FWP @Piyabutr_FWP I offer my condolences to the families of the victims and honor the bravery of those who sacrificed themselves," "@Pannika_FWP I would like to offer my condolences," and "@wirojla I offer my condolences to the relatives and families of the victims who passed away during this incident."⁴² The appeal to solidarity discursively neutralizes online criticisms about the army's structural flaws that allowed the shooting to happen – a discourse that many FFP politicians like Thanathorn began to promote on Twitter as they renewed calls for reforming the army to prevent abuses of junior officers like Jakrapanth (Bangkok Biz News 2020).

⁴² @wirojla is the account of FFP member of parliament Wiroj Lakkana-adisorn.

6.6.2 Mid-February: Promoting the Army's Promised Reforms and Stigmatizing FFP

The intensification of the *National Unity* frame was not the only discursive frame used to defuse critical discussions about the army and the government. The Korat mass shooting prompted the army leadership to show responsibility. During a press conference on February 11, General Apirat apologized and shed tears as he pleaded with the public not to blame the army (Nanuam 2020). He also pledged to undertake reforms, such as investigating illegal private businesses within the army, imposing restrictions on the types of weapons owned by army personnel and ending the rights of retired officials to live on army residential properties (Chaitrong 2020). A week later, the army announced the launch of a so-called “24-hour hotline” complaint center that would allow its rank-and-file and junior officers to directly report abuses to the commander-in-chief (Boonbandit 2020).

Consequently, army-linked digital astroturfers promoted tweets that contained a *Truthfulness* frame to reinforce Apirat's narratives and to discursively portray the general as an upstanding and sincere individual. They frequently retweeted posts from @1st_ARMY_AREA that contained snippets of Apirat's statements from his press conference that included: “The army apologizes and expresses its deepest condolences regarding this situation,” and “Nobody in the world or in Thailand wanted this to happen. Please do not insult the army or the soldiers. If you want someone to blame, then blame me.” These assets also repetitively commented on these source accounts with praises for the army to drown out criticisms that the army leadership was not receptive to the grievances of its rank-and-file. For example, when @armypr_news tweeted about the launch of the army's complaint center, they parroted praises for the initiative, including “Another good start. I trust the army's potential,” “This is very good,” and “If you feel wronged then notify them.”

Besides extensively cheerleading the army, RTA-linked digital astroturfers also devalued FFP politicians. In mid-February, Pongsakorn Rodchompoo – a retired-RTA lieutenant general-turned-FFP deputy leader and a strong proponent of military reform –

became embroiled in a controversy that exposed the party to public criticisms. During his appearance on “Kayee Kao Talk with Yukol” talk show on February 14, Pongsakorn admitted to overstaying in an army residential unit despite his retirement (Prachatai 2020a). As accusations of hypocrisy and conflicts of interests gained traction, he resigned from the party’s senior executive committee (Rojanaphruk 2020).

Pongsakorn’s resignation led right-wing activists from the pro-regime, nationalist-royalist community on Twitter to further discredit FFP’s leadership. Right-wing users such as @pookem, @political_drama, and @tigeryellowlive had mocked Pongsakorn’s physical appearance, signaled his hypocrisy, and shamed FFP for lying to the public. Many of their posts invoked frames functional to the digital astroturfers’ efforts to devalue FFP and to construct a semblance of popular resentment for the party. Retweets of right-wing criticisms of Pongsakorn’s misconduct that contained a combination of *Disgrace* and *Dishonesty* frames served to accentuate FFP’s image as an untrustworthy political party. Several assets, for example, retweeted the following posts from @pookem: “RT @pookem: Clean your house first, Thanathorn” and “RT @pookem: FFP should establish an executive committee to replace Baldhead before February 21 to absorb the blows [from his army housing scandal].⁴³ Additionally, army-linked digital astroturfers also retweeted posts that contained a combination of *Disgrace* and *Regression* frames to portray Pongsakorn as Apirat’s reverse image: dishonorable and backward. Notably, they retweeted anti-Pongsakorn commentaries from @Juahuaheadline, an online pseudo-news outlet, and posted derisive comments such as “@Juahuaheadline I think they should strip him of his ranks. He does not do anything good for the country besides collaborating with people who want to destroy the country.”

⁴³ The constitutional court dissolved FFP on February 21.

6.6.3 Late February: Renewed Praise of the Army and Further Harassment of FFP and its Supporters

Army-linked digital astroturfers continued to devalue FFP up to February 21 when the constitutional court issued a ruling to dissolve the party (See Figure 3). The legal case against FFP centered around the question of whether a Thai political party was permitted to borrow money to fund its operations and under which conditions. After the March 2019 elections, conservative supporters of the Prayut regime accused FFP of violating the 2017 Political Parties Act. They maintained that the party unlawfully submitted itself to Thanathorn's financial influence when it accepted his loans worth 191 million baht (\$6 million) to finance its election campaigns (Bangkok Post 2020a). Thanathorn, however, argued that the loan was meant to cement FFP's independence from other financiers and should be classified as a debt obligation (Prachatai 2020b).

As the court's ruling neared, digital astroturfers doubled down on retweeting posts from the same batch of nationalist-royalist users, that is, @political_drama, @a_veerayut, and @tigeryellowlive. These posts invoked a combination of *Disgrace* and *Dishonesty* frames to discursively portray FFP as a party of liars that did not deserve any sympathy. They also swarmed official Twitter accounts of FFP politicians, pro-democracy celebrities (e.g., John Winyou), and liberal-leaning news outlets (e.g., The Standard and The Matter) with abusive comments prior to the ruling. They commented, for example, "@johnwinyou I hope your party gets dissolved" and "I pray for your destruction." After the court ruled that FFP's loan was outside the course of ordinary business and effectively dissolved the party, these assets celebrated the ruling and mocked FFP politicians. For example, some of them wrote: "@Thanathorn_FWP Really did not survive," and "@thematterco Their [FFP] press conference is useless. The court already made its decision."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ @thematterco belongs to The Matter, a liberal-leaning online news outlet.

When pro-FFP, student-led demonstrations erupted shortly after the court's decision, digital astroturfers employed *Devalue* tweets and associated negative frames to manage online discourses with collective action potential. The *Public Disruption* frame is an illustrative example of their discursive efforts to construct protesters as potential inconveniences to public life. This was particularly reflected in comments that implicitly equated protests with public health risks as COVID-19 started to spread in the country: “@yingcheep Don't go. COVID is spreading” and “@commonners @yingcheep Be careful of COVID-19 when you go to crowded places.”⁴⁵

As criticisms against FFP's dissolution continued (Ratcliffe 2020), digital astroturfers renewed their efforts to discursively represent army soldiers according to a humanitarian logic, which involved highlighting the army's commitment to the welfare of Thai citizens. Tweets that contained *Public Security* and *Praiseworthy* frames started to gain traction as digital astroturfers promoted content about the army's provision of services to address the humanitarian and security needs of the public (See Figure 3), which included posts about army-led constructions of artesian wells in rural villages, distributions of water supplies to drought-affected communities, interdictions of drug-trafficking rings, operations to combat wildfires and air pollution, and monitoring of the COVID-19 virus along the Thai-Cambodian border. In the same vein, they showered the soldiers with praise for their heroism in the comments section. The hashtags that accompanied many of these comments (e.g., “Army for the people,” “The army is always a refuge for the people,” and “Soldiers of the people”) are indicative of continued discursive efforts to restore the army's reputation as the steward of the Thai people. Relatedly, they also propagated tweets that invoked a combination of *Public Security*, *Praiseworthy*, and *Truthfulness* frames in their efforts to enhance the army's image as a transparent and

⁴⁵ @yingcheep belongs to prominent civil rights activist Yingcheep Atchanont. @commoner is a pro-democracy user.

accountable organization. Many of these assets continued to retweet posts from journalists and news outlets that reported on the army's pledge to institute reforms to safeguard the welfare of its troops, including the 24-hour hotline complaint center and collaborations with the Ministry of Finance to tackle black money moving within the barracks (The Nation 2020b).

6.7 Conclusion and Implications

This contribution sought to examine why and how autocratic regimes discursively conduct digital astroturfing against their populations. I have argued that (1) digital astroturfing bears trace to the regime's threat perception of online discourses with collective action potential; and (2) regime-linked digital astroturfers exploit social media affordances to discursively create a semblance of popular support for the regime and resentment for regime challengers. My large-N qualitative study of RTA-linked tweets in February 2020 provides an initial, albeit in-depth, empirical support for my propositions. RTA-linked assets extensively cheerlead the regime through selective retweets of pro-regime content and comments after the Korat mass shooting, particularly those that helped create an empathetic bond with the army and the government. They also exploited the same platform affordance to devalue FFP, particularly by posting and retweeting content that framed and accentuated the latter's perceived moral bankruptcy and wrongdoings.

These findings bear resemblance to the CCP's strategy of "strategic distraction," in which the so-called "50 Cent Army" government-linked trolls flooded Weibo with pro-regime posts to divert public discourses away from collective action, grievances, and/or general negativity (King et al. 497). This enabled the party to channel boundaries of acceptable deliberation without having to censor as much as they might otherwise (King et al. 2017: 485). Beyond these initial similarities between Thailand and China, my findings also reveal ample digital opportunities for contemporary autocracies to adapt their legitimization strategies to new socio-technological realities. Strikingly, the absence of the corporeality of RTA-linked digital

astroturfers suggests that autocracies have learned to hide behind the attribution blur and claim plausible deniability to minimize blowback – all the while maintaining centralized control over operatives to ensure alignment with their hegemonic narratives (Conduit 2023). Outside Thailand, autocratic digital astroturfing has also reared its head in Russia (Pomerantsev 2019), Venezuela (Puyosa 2021), and Saudi Arabia (Berrie and Siegel 2021); these online efforts have enhanced strategic narratives functional to projecting an appearance of popular support amidst public criticisms in the name of regime stabilization. However, as Twitter attributions become more specific, these regimes have started co-opting non-state, trend-setting social media influencers to help promote their narratives (Brockling et al. 2023).

The discursive elements of RTA-linked digital astroturfing also point to a growing normalization of digital militarism in which online information is transformed into a conflictual element that necessitates management by the military – an actor traditionally committed to managing security (Jackson et al. 2021; Massa and Anzera 2023). The “platformization” of military social media communication allows military organizations like the RTA and commercial actors to exploit the social media logic to shape collective actions toward a positive identification with soldiers and amplification of the feeling of danger related to concrete adversaries – actions that largely underlie present-day strategic communication (see Van Dijck and Poell 2021; Massa and Anzera 2023; Ventsel et al. 2019; Jackson 2019). Recently, there were allegations that the RTA hired YouTube influencers and even created their own TikTok accounts to humanize soldiers by depicting their lives in the barracks (Tantirapan 2024).

Future work is now needed to understand the broader novelty and effects of my findings. This includes expanding the coding process to cover additional timeframes to track the relationship between digital astroturfing and regime threat perception, as well as conducting comparative work to increase my argument’s external validity beyond Thailand. Furthermore, because the intensive repetition of selected snippets of biased and/or misleading information creates an “information fog” which may add credibility to propagandistic narratives among

target users (Nissen 2015; Benkler et al. 2018: 33), scholars should systematically investigate the downstream effects of authoritarian digital astroturfing on collective action potential.

Chapter 7

Deepening Authoritarianism from Below: State-aligned users and the Affordances of Social Media for Supporting Repression in Bahrain and Myanmar (Article No. 3)

Abstract:

Social media, initially seen as a democratic panacea, is increasingly empowering state-aligned countermovement actors in autocracies to support repression. However, scant attention has been paid to more specific properties of social media that enable such outcomes. How do we explain such processes? Through the lens of affordances, I argue that social media enables state-aligned users to investigate digital traces of online discourses with collective action potential, collect information about dissidents, and publicize them as evidentiary materials of activities hostile to the regime. Consequently, these practices catalyze state repression. A diachronic comparison of anecdotal evidence from Bahrain's 2011 Pearl Roundabout uprising and Myanmar's 2021 military coup illustrates this article's propositions: Prominent state-aligned accounts typically screen-captured posts with anti-regime leanings and shared them on their pages or channels to incite regime crackdowns against targeted users. These outcomes emphasize the notion that informal actors also constitute additional sources of authoritarian state power.

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7.1 Deepening Authoritarianism from Below

The use of social media in autocracies is a double-edged sword (Gunitsky 2015). Notwithstanding its democratic potential (Earl and Kimport 2011; Diamond 2010; Jost et al. 2018; Meraz and Papacharissi 2013), social media has empowered informal networks of state-aligned countermovement actors in such a way that facilitates autocratization (see Maerz 2024). Rather than supporting dissidents and collective action against authoritarian incumbents,⁴⁶ these actors make contrary (political) claims to those of original movement actors (Mayer and Staggenborg 1996). Anti-democratic actors spanning pro-government digital vigilantes, right-wing media organizations, and anti-election networks have used social media platforms to name, shame, and “doxx” online users deemed hostile to the regime (Gabdulhakov 2020; Pearce 2015; Sombatpoonsiri 2020; Tucker et al. 2017).⁴⁷ More often than not, they investigate and document so-called “evidence” of anti-regime expressions, publicize identities and personal details of critics, as well as using these evidentiary materials to alert security agencies (Gabdulhakov 2020; Kirchgaessner and Vinter 2022; Sombatpoonsiri 2020; Yesil and Sözeri 2017). These micro-level actions do not supplant but appear to support macro-level repression, a key pillar of authoritarian regime stability (see Gerschewski 2013).

These bottom-up dynamics highlight the shortcomings of regime- and state-centric approaches (Feldstein 2021; Schlumberger et al. 2024; Stockmann et al. 2020) that take the dictator’s quest for regime survival as a starting premise for examining how autocracies use

⁴⁶ Autocracies are regimes with highly concentrated and unchecked power where opponents outside the small core of ruling elites are excluded from executive decision-making. See, among others, Linz (1964) and Geddes (1999). These core traits have motivated much theorizing on authoritarianism. This article therefore uses the terms “autocracy” and “authoritarianism” interchangeably.

⁴⁷ Doxxing is a type of online denunciation practice that, in addition to naming and shaming a user, typically involves collecting and sharing the targeted user’s personal details by publishing them on a public site (Trottier 2017: 56).

digital technologies to bolster repression. While they are essential in understanding digital innovations in repressive techniques, the specific modes and patterns through which citizens emerge to monitor and interfere in the lives of dissidents amid a highly interconnected informational environment remain a lacuna. An increasing number of studies (Saglam 2024; Sombatpoonsiri 2024) have adopted a practice-based approach, which frames authoritarianism as patterns of actions embedded in an organized context (Glasius 2023: 10), to demonstrate how digital technologies enable and incentivize authoritarian practices. Similar works (Gabdulhakov 2020; Jiang 2021; Sombatpoonsiri 2020; Yesil and Sözeri 2017) also recognize that social media enables pro-government supporters to monitor and report dissent. Yet, though these studies have illustrated the importance of individual agency and practices as additional sources of authoritarian state power, scant attention has been paid to more specific properties of social media technology that facilitate such outcomes. The visibility and increased opportunities for surveillance afforded by social media aid targeted gatherings of information on dissidents, thus presenting a new set of risks for anti-regime activity and/or deviations from established behavioral codes (see Pearce and Vitak 2016).

How, then, does social media enable state-aligned countermovement actors to support repression? Through the lens of affordances, I argue that social media enables state-aligned users to investigate digital traces of online discourses with collective action potential, collect information about dissidents, and publicize them as evidentiary materials of activities hostile to the regime.⁴⁸ Consequently, these practices catalyze regime crackdowns against targeted users.

For the sake of clarity, I approach the broad term “state-aligned” as a relationship between the state and countermovement actors that manifests when the latter engages in

⁴⁸ King et al. (2013: 2) defines collective action as collective expression – many people communicating on social media on the same subject – about actual collective action and about events that seem likely to generate collective action but have not yet done so.

behaviors that align with the former's political goal of suppressing critical voices (see Kargar and Rauchfleisch 2019). This includes, for example, efforts to shield the state from criticisms or democratic threats (see Judson et al. 2020: 7). Because digital communication technology affords anonymity that eschews direct attribution to specific regime-linked individuals or a government agency, this study separates the online actions of state-aligned countermovement actors from their real-world identities. Rather than uncovering the latter, I focus on the nature of the former's orientations, that is, their public-facing behaviors and statements in relation to regime stabilization efforts.

A diachronic comparison of these dynamics in the closed autocracies of Bahrain and Myanmar sheds light on this article's core propositions. In Bahrain, state-aligned users on X (formerly Twitter) and on Meta (formerly Facebook), where they documented posts expressing anti-regime leanings and identified dissidents, as well as publicized their personal details to incite arrests. Accounts such as *@7areghum* publicly accused protesters, bloggers, and journalists of being "traitors" and/or "terrorists" as they shared pictures and personal information of the latter. In some cases, they also encouraged their networks to provide more information on targeted users. Similar dynamics were evident in Myanmar: pro-junta Telegram channels collected digital traces of anti-regime expressions and publicized the original posters' personal details on top of advocating for the latter's arrests. In several cases, this catalyzed regime crackdowns on targeted users.

This study provides two contributions to existing research on digital authoritarianism. First, it goes beyond (and below) conventional state- or regime-centric paradigms to contextualize the role of informal actors in the online sphere in relation to repression, a crucial pillar of autocratic regime stability. Thus, it answers calls to combine critical approaches in unpacking less visible, albeit constitutive elements of authoritarian state power (see Gurol et al. 2024). Second, this contribution addresses issues pertinent to design choices at the interface between social media and authoritarianism and illustrates the fluid boundaries whereby online

and offline interactions may intersect with one another at different points. Understanding these properties and interactions in relation to the broader institutional environment yields deeper insights into the socio-technical dimensions of social media that enable state-aligned users to impede democratic movements and, by and large, contribute to the deepening of authoritarianism.⁴⁹

This study is structured as follows: The second section situates state-aligned countermovement actors at the center of social media affordances and unpacks the socio-technical properties that enable them to engage in the policing of dissent. The third discusses how these micro-level practices map onto macro-level repression. The fourth empirically scrutinizes the article's core propositions using anecdotal evidence of state-aligned social media accounts and their activities in the wake of Bahrain's 2011 Pearl Roundabout uprising and Myanmar's 2021 military coup, respectively. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on the broader significance of these findings and their implications for future research on social media and authoritarianism.

7.2 The Pitfalls of Liberation Technology: How Social Media Affordances Enable State-aligned Countermovement Actors to Police Dissent

Central to the self-organizing and public-driven nature of social media is the role of affordances that aid the formation of a collective identity and the construction of a campaign narrative (Khazraee and Novak 2018). Affordances, understood as a multidimensional relationship between the user and the object of the technology that facilitates certain types of practices (Boyd 2010; Evans et al. 2017),⁵⁰ are generally categorized as either abstract (i.e.,

⁴⁹ Lindstaedt (2021: 25) describes this trend as the deepening of authoritarian traits in already autocratic regimes.

⁵⁰ Following this line of conceptualization, it is not the social media platforms' provision of specific architectures per se, but rather *how* users interact with the objects and features of these platforms such as hashtags, @mentions, direct messages, and the Share button – that facilitate or constrain collective action communication campaigns.

high-level) or concrete (i.e., feature-oriented, low-level) (Bucher and Helmond 2017). This article remains in high-level categories because they capture the relational properties of social media platforms that facilitate user engagements on these sites, as opposed to low-level categories that are related to the platform's materiality and technical functions, such as features, buttons, and interfaces (Bucher and Helmond 2017).

Boyd (2010) identifies four key sets of high-level affordances: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability.⁵¹ First, persistence is the automatic recording and archiving of user-generated content, which allows it to reach large, diverse, and invisible audiences that the content producer does not anticipate, and simultaneously allows other users to find old content (Boyd 2010).⁵² Second, replicability refers to the possibility of duplicating and modifying accessible content linked to persistence (Boyd 2010). The combination of persistence and replicability creates "collapsed contexts" in which the lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries complicates the maintenance of distinct social contexts (Boyd 2010). This prompts individuals to undertake negotiating strategies, such as concealing personal information or avoiding potentially controversial topics (Marwick and Boyd 2014). At the same time, they may open multiple accounts, including creating anonymous and fake profiles (Costa 2018: 3644). Third, scalability signifies the high potential visibility of social media content to other users (Boyd 2010; Evans et al. 2017). Even if users decide to limit the visibility of their profiles and posts to certain audiences, they often have scarce control over the content that other users disclose about them (Lampinen et al. 2011). Fourth, because the use of social media leaves digital traces (i.e., persistence), searchability denotes the possibility that content can be accessed through search functions (Boyd 2010).

⁵¹ Numerous scholars have highlighted different aspects of affordances although their characterizations share many overlaps. Boyd's (2010) characterizations, for instance, have been further developed by scholars such as Evans et al. (2017) and Bossetta (2018).

⁵² Also see similar discussions by Bossetta (2018).

In the context of contentious politics, these socio-technical dimensions of social media offer both opportunities and risks for movement organizers and their supporters (Cammaerts 2015). On the one hand, they enable activists to share recorded acts of civil resistance against the regime and amplify frames that mobilize collective action (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013). On the other hand, content visibility creates a tremendous amount of data about an individual, including the ties that they share with other social media users (Pearce 2015). This affords lateral surveillance, that is, interpersonal social surveillance, and/or covert information collection about a user (Trottier and Lyon 2012; Pearce and Vitak 2016). This means that, to their detriment, contents produced and shared by dissidents expose them to anti-democratic actors who monitor online discourses critical of the regime and collect these digital traces as evidence to incite harassment, as well as alerting authorities to activities deemed hostile to the ruling elites (Jaydn et al. 2023; Jones 2013; Pearce 2015; Sombatpoonsiri 2020; Sombatpoonsiri 2024; Yesil and Sözeri 2017; Yesil 2021).

Such acts are commonplace in autocracies such as Thailand (Laungaramsri 2016), Turkey (Yesil 2021), Russia (Gabdulhakov 2020), Myanmar (Jaydn et al. 2023), and Bahrain (Jones 2013). Existing research on the denunciation of monarchy critics in Thailand (Laungaramsri 2016; Schaffar 2016; Sombatpoonsiri 2024) provides particularly relevant empirical insights into these processes. Nationalist-royalist groups, including the *Rubbish Collector* Organization (RCO) and *Social Sanction*, frequently used social media groups and pages to denounce prominent pro-democracy activists and online critics (both anonymous and non-anonymous) by publicizing screenshots of their posts to incite further abuse and harassment (Schaffar 2016). Notably, the RCO's Facebook group, which attracted more than 200,000 members in 2015, became a forum for hate speech and documentation of perceived offenses against the monarchy (Schaffar 2016). In some cases, social media screenshots were used in filing legal complaints with authorities (Schaffar 2016). These practices, therefore, bring unwanted forms of visibility to online dissidents. As Trottier (2017: 56) notes in his discussion

of digital vigilantism, such visibility is “unwanted (the target is typically not soliciting publicity), intense (content such as texts, photos and videos can circulate to millions of users within a few days), and enduring (the vigilantism campaign may be top search item linked to the target and even become a cultural reference).”

7.3 How State-aligned Countermovement Social Media Activism Catalyzes Repression

A major assumption in the authoritarianism literature posits that regime survival is a key objective of autocrats, thus focusing on the ways they seek to maintain political power (Gerschewski 2013; Schlumberger et al. 2024). Repression is an essential regime maintenance strategy that involves the “actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the state’s territorial jurisdiction, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities” (Davenport 2007). Levitsky and Way (2002) further distinguish between “high” and “low intensity” forms of repression. The former constitutes visible acts of violence and abuse involving prominent opposition figures or large groups (Levitsky and Way 2002: 388). The latter takes more subtle forms such as surveillance, short-term detainment, and legal measures to suppress dissent (Levitsky and Way 2002: 388).

While social media is thought to level information asymmetries by allowing dissidents to circumvent state control and participate in discourses in such a way that enhances collective action potential (Dragu and Przeworski 2019; Herasimenka 2022; Meraz and Papacharissi 2013), social media platforms are nevertheless predicated on mutual visibility and interactivity between users (Boyd 2010; Marichal 2012). As the above discussions on social media affordances suggest, users are vulnerable to having their online activities viewed by unintended audiences. This means that in autocracies – where there are elements within civil society that are closely aligned to the state (Büntje 2023; Jiang 2021; Sombatpoonsiri 2020) – the seemingly banal yet defiant “personal sousveillance” (e.g. protesters taking pictures of themselves at demonstrations and posting them on social media platforms) are subject to monitoring by state-

aligned countermovement actors who seek to reinforce dominant socio-political norms (Jones 2020: 276).

In such contexts, content visibility is likely to lower the threshold for state-aligned countermovement actors to collect digital traces of anti-regime discourse across time and space. In Thailand, nearly half of the lèse-majesté charges between November 2020 and August 2021 brought against pro-democracy activists, protesters, and other individuals were related to forms of online expression (International Federation for Human Rights 2021: 4). These cases stemmed from complaints made by members of royalist groups, cyber vigilantes, and other internet users (International Federation for Human Rights 2021: 4).

This partial link between micro-level online denunciations and macro-level repression is also evident in the Middle East. Following the failed 2016 military coup in Turkey, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) actively encouraged citizens to monitor social media for moral infractions and report alleged “social media terrorists” and “harmful content,” thereby fostering a culture of “online snitching” (Yesil and Sözeri 2017). AKP trolls, motivated by the goal of “consolidat[ing] [the] government’s power” (Bulut and Yörük 2017: 4094), also acted as informants and reported critical social media posts to security agencies (Topak 2019). In another instance, Turkish police arrested social media users who praised the bombing in Istanbul in 2016 based on more than 17,000 emails received from citizens (Şimşek and Zengin 2016). In Saudi Arabia, 34-year-old Leeds University student Salma al-Shehab was arrested upon her return to the country and sentenced to jail for following and retweeting dissidents and activists (Kirchgaessner 2022). Her arrest came after a Saudi Twitter account called *Faisal OT* took screenshots of Shehab’s Twitter activity and reported it on *Kollona Am*, a Saudi government e-service app that allows citizens to submit security and criminal reports related to defamation and fraud, among others. (Kirchgaessner and Vinter 2022).

7.4 Cases: Bahrain and Myanmar

I adopt a diachronic comparative approach to empirically illustrate this study's core propositions in two dissimilar contexts of anti-regime mass demonstrations at different points in time: Bahrain's 2011 Pearl Roundabout uprising and Myanmar's 2021 military coup. Diachronic analysis focuses on explaining processes in different time periods, and it can do so without confronting the complexities posed by highly variegated cultures, societies, and political systems (Cooper and Brady 1981: 988). Additionally, since the approach involves explaining changes and dynamics over time, it directs attention to the context as well as the unit, to exogenous as well as endogenous factors, and the interaction between the two (Cooper and Brady 1981: 988).

Bahrain and Myanmar are considered closed autocracies (VDEM 2024: 17). However, there are crucial differences at the time of these events of change including state fragility, history of democratic transition, internet penetration, government control of internet infrastructure, and the scope, modes, and functionality of social media technology that make for an instructive diachronic comparison that complements studies on "different kinds of authoritarianism" (see Geddes 1999: 121).

First, Myanmar evinces stronger signs of state fragility than Bahrain based on the Fragile State Index.⁵³ In the wake of the Pearl Roundabout uprising, Bahrain ranked 129th in 2011 and 125th in 2012. Though Bahrain's state fragility increased from 2011 to 2024 (i.e., rising from the 129th to the 100th position), it still ranks considerably lower than Myanmar's, which ranked 18th at the time of the Pearl Roundabout uprising. However, three years after the February 2021 coup, Myanmar became the 11th most fragile state in the world. Second, while Myanmar's democratic experiment was short-lived – lasting from 2010 to 2021 – Bahrain has remained a closed autocracy under monarchical rule since its independence in 1971 (V-DEM

⁵³ Use Fragile State Index's (n.d.) dashboard to compare state fragility in Bahrain and Myanmar in 2011 and 2021.

2024: 61). Third, Bahrain has been connected to the internet since 1995 (Freedom House 2012: 65). In 2010, Bahrain ranked first on the telecommunications infrastructure in the Middle East, and the number of users rose rapidly, from 28% in 2006 to 77% in 2011 (Freedom House 2012: 66). However, only 43% of the population in Myanmar had access to the internet in 2021 (Freedom House 2021).⁵⁴ Fourth, Bahrain did not have a central internet backbone until 2019 when state-controlled internet service provider Batelco launched the National Broadband Network (BNET), which manages a single fiber-optic broadband network in the country (Freedom House 2024a).⁵⁵ By contrast, the February 2021 coup brought Myanmar's telecommunication regulatory bodies under the junta's direct control (Freedom House 2024b). Finally, social media technology in 2011 was different from that in 2021. Driven by technological advancements and strategic decisions by social media companies, transnational services such as Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram have increasingly embraced multimedia content, real-time interaction, and mobile access, as well as enhancing content recommendations through artificial intelligence (Helmond and Van der Vlist 2019).

With respect to the analytical timeframe, Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout uprising lasted from February 2011 to June 2011 when King Hamad (bin Isa) Al Khalifah lifted the state of emergency across the kingdom (BBC 2011). In Myanmar, the anti-coup mass protests that erupted in February 2021 gave way to armed resistance against the junta that devolved into a civil war (Wießman 2024). Because the conflict is still ongoing, I limit the timeframe to February 2021 and October 2023. The latter month constitutes a crucial turning point due to the emergence of an alliance comprising three anti-junta ethnic armed groups that launched an offensive significantly pushing back the Tatmadaw in the country's northern areas (Head and

⁵⁴ Myanmar's internet penetration levels in 2011 were below 10% for mobile, and even lower for fixed line and internet (see Asian Development Bank 2016).

⁵⁵ BNET's creation means that the entire fiber-optic broadband network can be restricted or shut down using one switch, as opposed to waiting for government orders to come from the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority.

Luo 2023). There is indeed no neat cut-off point because Myanmar has been under a national state of emergency since February 2021 (Nikkei 2024). However, the timeframe of interest is arguably extensive and significant enough to observe patterns of socio-technical dynamics driven by state-aligned countermovement social media users that support the repression of dissidents, especially against backdrop of escalations in state repression that target civilians in relation to periodic acts of civil disobedience such as flash mobs and “silent strikes,” as well as armed resistance across the country during this period (Egretau 2023; Wießman 2024).⁵⁶

To locate prominent state-aligned social media accounts for the empirical illustration of this article’s core propositions, I rely on reputable secondary sources to manually source them.⁵⁷ These include news reports, documentaries, and investigative journalistic articles from credible outlets (e.g., Frontier Myanmar, Al Jazeera, and Radio Free Asia), non-government organization reports (e.g., local and international digital rights watchdogs and human rights organizations), independent expert investigations, and academic publications. This helped establish a clearer focus on accounts that have already been flagged by reputable media outlets and rights organizations for their online harassment against dissidents.⁵⁸ Furthermore, I borrow Kargar and Rauchflesh’s (2019: 1513-1514) detailed inferences on the features of state aligned profiles to more precisely distinguish these accounts and their orientations, including (1) an inauthentic profile picture that include non-human photos or stolen photos of a legitimate person; (2) use of violent and vulgar languages; (3) public dissemination of threats of arrests and death, and, in the case of women, threats of rape and sexual assault; (4) profile name that

⁵⁶ Use Assistance Association for Political Prisoners’s (n.d.) dashboard to see trends of state violence against civilians.

⁵⁷ The main keywords used for the manual search included a combination of the following: “doxxing,” “informants,” “cyber vigilantes,” “surveillance,” “social media,” “Twitter,” “Facebook,” and “Telegram.”

⁵⁸ I acknowledge the potential for underreporting of similar profiles due to limited media coverage and prioritization of incidents and accounts with sensational elements.

carries political and/or religious connotations. Table 1 presents a non-exhaustive list of flagged accounts aligned with the Bahraini and Myanmar regimes.

Table 1: Prominent state-aligned accounts in the Bahraini and Myanmar digital sphere.

Case	Social media handle/page/channel	Platform	Non-human/Stolen profile picture	Violent/Vulgar language	Threats of Death/ Arrest/ Rape/Sexual assault	Political/ Religious connotations
Bahrain	@7areghum	Twitter	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	@ModSAIKhalifa	Twitter	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	@BahrainFirst	Twitter	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	@adelmaymoon	Twitter	No	Yes	Yes	No
	@rightsbahrain	Twitter	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	@Bahrainwhite1	Twitter	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Against Ayat al Qurmezi	Facebook	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Bahrain Against False Media	Facebook	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Myanmar	Han Nyein OO	Telegram	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Thazin OO	Telegram	No	Yes	Yes	No
	Ba Nyunt	Telegram	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Kyaw Swar	Telegram	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Sergeant Phoe Si	Telegram	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Hmine Wai	Telegram	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Hpayethi Hnein Hnin Yay	Telegram	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Author's own compilation

7.4.1 Bahrain: State-Aligned Social Media Activism During the 2011 Pearl Roundabout Uprising

Sparked by popular upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt, Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout uprising that started on 14 February 2011 was a watershed moment in a Shia-majority state ruled by a Sunni monarchy. While the Sunni al-Khalifa regime is no stranger to protests, the scale of the uprising constituted an unprecedented threat to the tiny kingdom's ruling bargain (Ulrichsen 2013: 336). After a few days of protests and confrontations with Bahraini security forces, the predominantly Shia protesters converged on the interior of the Pearl Roundabout, a

major traffic circle in Manama, the capital of Bahrain (Ulrichsen 2013: 3).⁵⁹ The protests increasingly assumed popular overtones as Shia and Sunni alike chanted slogans such as “No Shia, no Sunnis, only Bahrainis” and “Down, down Khalifa!” (Ulrichsen 2013: 3). At their peak, a fifth of Bahrain’s 1.2 million population participated in the demonstrations (Wehrey 2013: 116).

While most of the mobilization, organization, and management of these protests took place offline (Fowler and Steinert-Threlkeld 2016: 1), activists also leveraged social media to communicate events instantaneously to followers locally and domestically. Social media affordances lowered the threshold for protesters to document and circulate pictures and video footage that captured police brutality against protesters and young children (Karolak 2017: 95-96), as well as sharing news and updates on the situation from each village (Khamis and Alwadi 2015: 53).

However, many Bahraini activists and dissidents were unaware that their social media posts were being repurposed for anti-democratic ends (Jones 2020: 276). State-aligned users often threatened journalists and bloggers who published articles supportive of political opposition groups or protesters, or critical of the government or pro-government groups (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry 2011: 391). The persistence and scalability of such posts made it easier to locate and engage in targeted information gathering on dissidents. State-aligned users regularly documented protest-related content that circulated platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and subsequently framed dissenters as “Shia terrorists” in league with Iran, as well as blaming them for causing the unrest (MacKinnon 2012: 62). On Facebook, a page called “Bahrain Against False Media” posted photos of influential bloggers and accused them of attempting to “trick the international media and statements and citizens of the country to join them in their hate campaign under the guise of pro-democracy while in fact it was purely

⁵⁹ Bahraini security forces comprised almost entirely of Sunnis.

anti-government” (MacKinnon 2012: 62-63). Similar practices were evident on Twitter, with *@7areghum* (which literally means “the one that burns them”) and *@Mnarfezhom* (which was later revealed to be run by Mohammed bin Saqer Alkhalifa, a member of the ruling family), representing the most extreme examples in the Bahraini context (Jones 2013: 78; Jones 2020: 278). These online coercive practices were in close alignment with the regime’s attempts to stir up sectarian tensions. Notably, the regime accused protesters and the country’s largest political Shia movement, Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, of being protégés of Iran and Hezbollah to stoke fears of the Sunni minority (Shama 2019: 23).

Because of its acquired notoriety amongst Bahrainis, the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry singled out *@7areghum* in its 2011 report. Not too long after the protests began, the account posted photos of people seen at anti-government rallies, circled their faces, and disclosed their personal information, including names, addresses, phone numbers, and current locations (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry 2011: 391). In some cases, *@7areghum* posted photos of protesters at the roundabout while asking its 14,000 followers to identify them (Kerr 2011). Protesters whose photos were circulated went into hiding while some fled the country altogether (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry 2011: 391; Jones 2013: 79). Furthermore, the account reportedly advertised the Ministry of Interior’s (MOI) “hotline” with which people could call to report dissidents (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry 2011: 381).

Between February and April, Twitter’s @-mention feature enabled state-aligned countermovement actors to bring unwanted visibility to so-called “traitors” by directly tagging the MOI’s account (*@moi_bahrain*) in their posts (Jones 2013: 82). For example, the user *@BahrainFirst* attempted to lead the MOI to a suspected anti-regime critic by posting “@moi_bahrain, please apprehend this moronic traitor he’s a wefaqi @haythoo” (Jones 2020: 276). Similarly, *@Bahrainwhite1* tweeted “@hussainm89 Dear @moi_bahrain can you please arrest this MOFO Hussain Mirza born 1989, he is a traitor” (Jones 2012; Jones 2020: 275). Pro-

government poster Adel Maymoon notably encouraged fellow Bahrainis to continue searching and reporting anti-government protesters: “If u [sic] have any names or information about any traitor or terrorists, kindly send it to @moi_bahrain no need to expose his family & children” (Jones 2020: 276).

In some cases, the revelation of dissidents’ identities and personal information assisted the regime’s repression, in which targeted individuals were arrested and placed under investigation for several days before their release (MacKinnon 2012: 62-63). On March 24, the *Bahrain Against False Media* Facebook page posted photos of influential bloggers that it accused of conspiring against the government (Freedom House 2012: 14). Among them included Manaf al-Muhandis (the founder of the popular “Unite Bahrain” Twitter campaign), Mahmood Al Yousif (known as the “godfather” of Bahraini bloggers), and Mohammed Al-Masqati (known as “Emoodz” on Twitter and was active in covering the uprising) – all of whom were arrested during midnight house raids on March 30 (Freedom House 2012: 14).⁶⁰ Similarly, 20-year-old poet Ayat al-Qurmezi, who read out a poem at the Pearl Roundabout that criticized King Hamad, was tracked down by masked commandos after an Arabic-language Facebook page called “Against Ayat al Qurmezi” demanded her arrest and torture in prison, as well as asking its followers to participate in defaming her honor (Al Jazeera 2011).

7.4.2 Myanmar: State-Aligned Social Media Activism Surrounding the 2021 Military Coup

Just hours before Myanmar’s newly elected parliament convened on 1 February 2021, the military launched a coup and arrested members of the National League for Democracy

⁶⁰ Advocates of Masqati’s release also received threats on Twitter by @ModSAlkhalifa (a presumed member of the royal family) that they “will have [their] IP address taken and will get arrested” (Reporters Without Borders 2011).

(NLD), including Aung San Suu Kyi, who has long been a potent symbol of civil disobedience under decades of military rule (Thawngmung and Noah 2021: 297). The coup spurred nationwide civil resistance movements against the junta (Deutsche Welle 2021). However, as the regime escalated its violent crackdowns, many citizens increasingly opted to engage in armed resistance such as joining the People's Defense Forces (PDF) at the encouragement of the National Unity Government (NUG) – the opposition government in exile (Strangio 2021).

Social media affordances enabled Myanmar activists and their supporters to broaden anti-junta activism by recruiting and organizing demonstrations, documenting the military's excesses against protestors, journalists, and civilians, as well as adapting protest repertoires from neighboring contexts such as Thailand and Hong Kong to bolster their activism (Egreteau 2022: 827; Lukito et al. 2023; Rao and Atmakuri 2021). As the protests intensified, Twitter – analogous to the Bahraini case – became increasingly filled with images and videos in which users employed the hashtag “#WhatsHappeningInMyanmar” to draw domestic and international attention to the situation in the country (Tangen Jr. 2021). On TikTok, anti-regime users posted live and recorded videos of clashes between protestors and police, and tributes to those killed (Tangen Jr. 2021).

Despite the swell of anti-junta social media activism, the same affordances that empowered activists also enabled state-aligned users to take screenshots of anti-regime content as evidentiary materials of activities hostile to the junta, as well as sharing the original posters' personal information with their networks. After Facebook and Instagram banned Myanmar military and military-controlled state and media entities from their platforms for spreading hate speech and disinformation (BBC 2021), Telegram emerged as an alternative site where diverse pro-junta channels such as *Han Nyein Oo*, *Thazin Oo*, *Kyaw Swar*, *Sergeant Phoe Si*, and *Hpayethi Hnein Hnin Yay* coordinated their information collection and disclosure of dissidents' personal information (Duncan and Mendelson 2021; Nachemson and Frontier 2022a; Myanmar

Internet Project 2024; Myanmar Witness 2023; Nachemson and Frontier 2022b).⁶¹ Although the exact number of victims is not known, the number of reported cases has dramatically increased since the coup (Guest 2022). Their victims ranged from high-profile celebrities to ordinary citizens such as small business owners and students (Athan 2023: 26; Guest 2022).

Han Nyein Oo emerged as one of the most notorious Telegram channels that assisted authorities in repressing online dissidents. Other pro-junta channels, such as *Ba Nyunt* and *Hmine Wai*, often reshared *Han Nyein OO*'s posts (Myanmar Internet Project 2024). Since the coup, *Han Nyein Oo* has collaborated with 59 other pro-junta Telegram channels and promoted 28 additional pro-junta channels (Myanmar Internet Project 2024). Notably, when anti-junta activists planned to mark the coup's first anniversary with a "silent strike" by calling on local businesses to close and leave the streets empty, *Han Nyein Oo* demanded that its followers search for and send in photos of shops that were planning to join the cause (Nachemson and Frontier 2022b). The account openly declared that the purpose of the campaign was to notify authorities (Nachemson and Frontier 2022b). In one post, *Han Nyein OO* shared a screenshot of the profile and location of an online small business based in Yangon, which caused the owner to flee to the border (Aung 2022). Furthermore, it brought unwanted exposure to members of the security forces who posted critical remarks about the regime. For instance, on December 5, 2021, a police officer condemned an incident in which a military vehicle rammed into a peaceful demonstration and killed five people; he was reportedly arrested on February 8, 2022 (Nachemson and Frontier 2022a).⁶²

Such targeted exposures catalyzed regime crackdowns. More than 200 people were arrested after *Han Nyein Oo* posted personal information of dissidents who published Facebook posts expressing support for the silent strike alongside calls for their arrest (Aung 2022). Their

⁶¹ See Myanmar Internet Project (2024) for detailed descriptions of these channels.

⁶² The officer posted his criticism on December 5, 2021, and was reportedly arrested on February 8, 2022.

arrests were preceded by posts in *Han Nyein Oo* and other pro-junta Telegram channels, including *Kyaw Swar* and *Thazin Oo*, just a few days prior (Aung 2022). *Han Nyein Oo* itself often boasted that some of the flagged businesses were raided, and their owners arrested for supporting “the terrorist NUG and PDF” (Nachemson and Frontier 2022a). These practices continued over the course of the year. On April 11, 2023, the Myanmar military launched airstrikes in Pazi Gyi village in a rebel-held township of Kanbalu that killed at least 165 people. Following the incident, *Han Nyein Oo*, *Kyaw Swar*, and *Ba Nyunt* coordinated online campaigns to expose Facebook users who changed their profile picture to black to express solidarity with the victims (Myanmar Witness 2023). Notably, Myanmar Witness (2023) found 11 occasions where online critics were arrested for “supporting terrorism” after their identities were revealed alongside calls for their torture and arrest. Some screenshots of their criticisms against the junta were taken as quickly as one minute after users had posted them (Myanmar Witness 2023).

How social media affordances enabled state-aligned countermovement actors to support repression arguably reinforced the junta’s control over dissent. These online coercive practices often prompted self-censorship amongst Myanmar pro-democracy activists and their supporters. A student affiliated with the anti-junta Civil Disobedience Movement recalled: “If we respond or comment on an anti-junta post and the social media profile is not locked, the military junta’s informants will report the account to the military, causing the arrest of the account owner” (Athan 2023). Another Yangon resident stopped posting on Facebook after the coup and deleted old posts related to politics (Nadi 2023).

7.5 Conclusion and Implications

This study examined how social media enables state-aligned countermovement actors to support repression. The diachronic comparison of the dynamics in the wake of Bahrain’s 2011 Pearl Roundabout uprising and Myanmar’s 2021 supports, based on Boyd’s (2010) suggestions, this article’s central propositions. In particular, social media afforded state-aligned

countermovement users in both cases sustained and targeted monitoring of discourses with collective action potential, collection of dissidents' personal information, as well as the publicization of the latter as evidentiary materials of activities hostile to the regime. In several cases, these actions further incited regime crackdowns against targeted users as a direct consequence.

This article does not conclude on the notion of technological determinism whereby social media technology, and its evolution, autonomously begets political changes. Rather, the findings emphasize the interconnectedness of authoritarian state power with informal networks of anti-democratic actors located within a broader digital media culture of users organize online, amongst an expansive and ever-asserting social media infrastructure whose socio-technical opportunities have redefined and reorganized the dynamics of contentious politics (Trottier 2017: 59). Their instrumentalization of social media's functions to monitor and threaten dissidents illustrates an informal mechanism of social control that is interlinked with the regime's repertoires of repression to suppress collective action.

Future research is now needed to comprehend the broader novelty and implications of this interplay between micro-level online dynamics and the regime's repressive apparatus, including mapping out dynamic models of this relationship. While the anecdotal evidence presented in this study thus far suggests that this interplay leads some citizens to self-censor, others have also engaged in similar practices against the state (see Lee 2022). A systematic modeling of the triangular relationship between dissidents, state-aligned users, and repression can pave the way toward a better understanding of the extent to which online-induced regime violence against dissidents decreases or rather spurs more and new digital forms of anti-regime resistance. Furthermore, because this article's findings do not speak to the motivations of state-aligned users, the scholarship would also benefit from further theory-building on the individual-level factors that shape these dynamics.

Chapter 8

Discussion and Future Research Directions

The impacts of the digital revolution on political rule are multifaceted and are unfolding from the institutional to the individual, cognitive level. The case studies in this dissertation make clear that digitization has led to divergent outcomes in democracies and autocracies. In highlighting these processes, it becomes clear that the complex structures, institutions, political and social actors, and regime power maintenance logics and ruling practices with which digitization interacts play a role in producing such outcomes.

This concluding section reviews the empirical evidence that supports the main claims, draws out the implications for the scholarship, and discusses possible extensions of the work that would require further research and distills core insights from the research for shaping digital policy interventions.

8.1 Summary of Findings

My findings paint an unsettling picture for technology evangelists and democracy hopefuls who had placed a winning bet on technology as a democratizing force. Despite initial optimism wrought by the swell of mass protests across the Arab world in the early 2010s, the scenario depicted by the scholarship has faded over the past decade. From the amplification of misinformation and politically divisive content, digital technologies amplify socio-political processes that undermine democracy's institutional guardrails, while the subversion of their potential by autocratic regimes and their supporters, from digital astroturfing to so-called "dissent spotting," have further contributed to authoritarian deepening.

The first article provided an empirical illustration of how transformations in the citizens' informational environment as a result of the three features inherent to digitization catalyze

attitudes and behaviors that put stress on established democracies. In the case of the 2021 US Capitol insurrection, the combination of an abundance of contradictory information about official election results of the 2020 presidential elections, difficulties in identifying truthful accounts, and algorithmic targeting paved the way for a militant offline mass of misbelievers. Similarly, in Germany, digitization played a role in catalyzing the violent protests in August 2020 in front of the *Reichstag*. Selective exposure to online misinformation about COVID, which was reinforced by algorithmic targeting of QAnon and ID2020 conspiracy theories on social media platforms (particularly YouTube), induced a misguided belief among the protesters and skeptics that their resistance was against a supposed “COVID dictatorship.”

The second article provided a granular, data-driven case study on digital astroturfing operations purportedly orchestrated by the Royal Thai Army (RTA) under the military/autocratic regime of General Prayut Chan-o-cha. RTA-linked assets extensively cheerlead the regime through selective retweets of pro-regime content and comments after the Korat mass shooting, particularly those that helped create an empathetic bond with the army and the government. They also exploited the same platform affordance to devalue the pro-democracy Future Forward Party (FFP). Their tactics often included posts and retweets of content that framed and accentuated the FFP’s perceived moral bankruptcy and wrongdoings.

The third article offered an empirical illustration of the nexus between micro-level online activities and macro-level repression in autocracies, that is, how the socio-technical dimensions of social media enable state-aligned users to catalyze repression. In Bahrain, state-aligned users on Twitter and Facebook documented posts expressing anti-regime leanings, identified dissidents, including protesters, journalists, and bloggers, and publicized their personal details while inciting authorities to arrest these so-called “traitors” and “terrorists.” In some cases, they also encouraged their networks to provide more information on targeted users. Similar dynamics were evident in Myanmar: pro-junta Telegram channels collected digital

traces of anti-regime expressions and publicized the original posters' personal details. In several cases, this catalyzed regime crackdowns on targeted users.

8.2 Implications for Scholarship

The synoptic framework that undergirds this dissertation improves our understanding of the factors responsible for these puzzling outcomes. The framework does this in part by drawing on insights from the study of comparative politics, which traditionally has paid great attention to the nature of internal threats and structures of deliberation across democracies and autocracies (cf. i.a., Ezrow and Frantz 2011; Schedler 2013; Svolik 2012; Talmadge 2015). In contrast to a strictly tool-centered approach, my application of this holistic perspective, supported by comparativist traditions, to the dimensions of digital transformations in two different regime contexts enables scholars to make statements about what exactly is changing the nature of politics on a political level, as opposed to a technical one (Schlumberger et al. 2024). Indeed, this distinction has driven one of the most prominent and provocative findings in the existing literature on digitization and democratization: that digitally-induced transformations in political rule have weakened democracy and strengthened autocracy.

This dissertation complements prominent scholarly efforts and pushes them in some new directions. Chief among these is a comprehensive examination of the flows and transformations of political communication in democracies in relation to the political regime level as information circulates through new digital communication platforms. This is a departure from previous approaches that have largely concentrated on the isolated aspects of technology (e.g., algorithms) or individual elements of democracy (e.g., the deliberative quality of public forums). By systematically linking the effects of digitization to democratic theory and political regime theory, we can better assess whether threats to democracy emerge and to determine whether they are systemic or transitory.

The focus on the authoritarian ruling logic is also important because arguments underpinning authoritarian resilience have not solely rested on the techniques alone but also the incentives and threats that shape the employment of specific digital technologies in order to enhance regime survivability (Feldstein 2021). By considering the dictator's overarching logic of power maintenance that guides policies, scholars can comprehend why and to what effect dictators employ various means to stay in power (Schlumberger et al. 2024). After all, political contestations in autocratic regimes are dynamic, and threats can shift even though the governing institutions do not. As Frantz et al. (2020: 18) note, while military coups have historically posed the greatest threat to dictators, protests are now the most serious threat to autocratic survival. The centrality of threats and authoritarian digital practices, as examined in the case of Thailand, suggests that specific kinds of dissent can threaten autocratic survival, thus prompting the regime to deploy digital tools against certain discourses that are perceived to enhance collective action potential against the regime. Hence, by treating digital technology as an intervening variable, we avoid the determinism and linear understanding that pervaded early thinking about digitization and democratization. In the same vein, it is vital to explain the continuity of authoritarian rule as well as its changing characteristics in the digital era.

Finally, this dissertation's focus on online dynamics below the regime and state level also differs from previous work that takes the dictator's quest for political survival as a starting premise. Behaviors and practices of non-state actors in the online sphere are important because they reveal the importance of individual agency and practices as additional sources of authoritarian continuity. The exploitations of social media affordances by state-aligned users in Bahrain and Myanmar to support repression in periods of political unrest reinforce this intuition. Hence, the dissertation's focus on this dimension not only helps illustrate how increased online deliberation benefits the regime but also encourages scholars to further situate informal actors in relation to authoritarian ruling techniques as opposed to in a vacuum.

It is safe to say that these insights help extend the frontiers of digitally-adjacent political science research in the universes of democracies and autocracies. Nevertheless, the limits touched upon in each of the three articles, from the preliminary nature of the empirical illustrations of the theorized causal chain between digitization and democratic decay to the issue of generalizability of the findings on Thailand's digital astroturfing phenomenon, beg further scholarly engagements. In terms of the first article, which offered a plausibility probe to illustrate the causal pathway by which the features of digitization give rise to dangers that threaten democracy as a regime type, scholars should subject the theoretical framework and the preliminary empirical illustrations to more systematic testing. Further, despite the preliminary nature of the findings, future scholarship would also benefit from the development of more fine-grained instruments with which researchers, as well as democratic policymakers, can better assess and potentially quantify such latent stress to democracy.

Second, notwithstanding the depth and granularity of the second article's data-driven approach to state-backed digital astroturfing in Thailand, several aspects of this work should be extended into new areas. This includes expanding the coding process to cover additional timeframes beyond February 2020 in order to more rigorously track the relationship between digital astroturfing and regime threat perception vis-à-vis collective action potential, as well as conducting comparative work to increase the external validity of the article's central premises beyond Thailand. Furthermore, scholars should systematically investigate the downstream effects of digital astroturfing on collective action potential.

Third, while the anecdotal evidence presented in the third article shows that online coercive actions of state-aligned users catalyze state repression against social media dissent, further theoretical and empirical work that builds on these findings can enable insights into the conditions by which these outcomes promote censorship or spur new forms of anti-regime resistance. While the former is known, we also know, for example, that protesters in cases such as Hong Kong have also used social media to reveal the identities of state authorities involved

in crackdowns (Li and Whitworth 2024). More rigorous efforts at theory-building are also needed to systematically assess the underlying motivations of state-aligned users in exposing dissidents to targeted crackdowns, whether they are driven by a sense of nationalism or material rewards, or a combination of both.

8.3 Relevance for Digital Policy

The synoptic framework and empirical evidence presented in this work speak to several real-world policy issues in the digital sphere. Chief among these are democracy and digital governance, along with efforts to roll back actions, either by accident or design, that enable digital technologies to interfere with political representation and spread contradictory information that undermines public confidence in democratic institutions and values. This section discusses each of these in turn.

This dissertation's emphasis on the respective diverging outcomes in democracies and autocracies paves the way for more multi-level assessments of the effects associated with digitization than are often possible in academic studies that focus on a specific issue or aspect of digital technology, such as state surveillance, disinformation, and algorithms. These issues surely matter, but the manner in which they impact the nature of, or within, political systems is of vital concern for democratic policymakers. The question preceding the adoption and deployment of digital technology is rarely about whether internet access and digital literacy will increase access to political discourse. Given that connectivity is an important socio-technical dimension of digital technology, it will most likely always provide new avenues for political participation and civic activism. However, this has not manifested in such a way as imagined. The real question, therefore, is what are the costs and unintended effects of digitization for democracy, even if it has increased connectivity and enabled people to access unprecedented amounts of information?

The findings here shed a closer light on this question, illuminating a vital set of factors and mechanisms to be analyzed in assessing tensions between social media use and democratization in both universes of established democracies and autocracies. Targeted “personalized” marketing has become an everyday part of most web users’ experience. Algorithms on various platforms rank data signals such as likes and comments to keep users engaged with hyper-personalized content (Mosseri 2021). Though framed as a user-facing benefit by platforms, targeted content is not primarily the goodwill gesture it might first appear. Instead, the user data mined as part of targeting processes function as the driving economic resource for the free-to-use platform (Kant 2021). Because of its monetizable qualities, targeting can – as my case studies of the US and Germany show – create formidable ethical and policy problems in relation to, among others, data privacy and the spread of misinformation and polarizing content.

In general, the digitally-induced manifestation of anti-democratic actions at the US Capitol and the German Reichstag should compel democratic policymakers to re-examine the laissez-faire approach to digital governance, which defers regulating powerful tech companies to promote competition. In the US, Congress has considered but has yet to pass a unified federal data privacy law (Warburton 2024). The US has a patchwork of laws at the state and sometimes local level governing digital technologies, including consumer data privacy and law enforcement use of facial recognition (Scharre 2023). The lack of regulation leads to varying corporate policies that are reflected in the different approaches by social media firms to regulating disinformation and AI-generated synthetic media, such as deepfakes (Scharre 2023). The emphasis on removing barriers to competition jeopardizes efforts at ensuring data privacy and combating harmful content in the digital space. Meta’s (which owns Facebook, Instagram, and Threads) recent decision to discontinue fact-checking programs on its platforms reinforces this concern (Isaac and Schleifer 2025).

For democratic policymakers peering outward into the universe of autocracies, my case studies encourage humility about the transformations of authoritarian politics that digital technology can induce. The challenge of authoritarian entrenchment has already been mentioned: that by embracing digitization and digital technologies, authoritarian incumbents reap the economic benefits as well as the political benefits of being able to know about what their societies and elites do or plan, influence behaviors, and manipulate beliefs. (Schlumberger et al. 2024; Feldstein 2021). The Royal Thai Army's creation of sockpuppet networks on Twitter to create an impression of a vibrant online community in which individuals are autonomously mobilizing to defend the Prayut regime from public backlash highlights the legitimization logic driving the behavior.

These realities have important implications for assessing social media's capabilities to aid democratization in these regimes. Emerging trends of state-backed digital astroturfing, as exemplified by the Royal Thai Army, signal a shift from early stages of brute-force suppression of online discourse to a proactive subversion and co-optation of social media to undermine the opposition and shape the contours of public discussion, as well as affordably gather information about preferences (Gunitsky 2015). Autocratic regimes have learned to hide behind the attribution blur afforded by digital communication platforms to shield themselves from external blowback as they leverage individual-level network interactions to amplify narratives that align with their goals (Conduit 2024). In a similar vein, state-aligned vigilante practices that catalyze state repression against online expressions of dissent have also benefited from the attribution blur that makes it difficult to assess these users' links to the regime. Although social media companies have adopted measures to detect malicious uses and "de-platform" such users (Casas 2024), deplatformed users often migrate to alternative platforms (Rogers 2020). Users may even resurface on the same platform with different accounts. In Myanmar, it did not take long for banned pro-military channels on Telegram to reportedly resurface again on the same platform (Deutsche Welle 2024). In such cases, internet stakeholders should reconsider platform-level

interventions and promote simultaneous actions against multiple social media platforms or act proactively rather than reactively during periods of political unrest. Future policies should call for improvements to platform designs that encourage the kinds of diverse membership that can enable critical reflection and read social media metadata in such a way that will reveal intentions and slippages – digital traces that give way to the identification of malicious uses (Acker 2019).

Democratic policymakers should continue to remain critical about the adoption and deployment of digital technologies in autocracies and on their home turf. The potential of these technologies to aid democratization cannot be solely judged from a tool-based lens, but rather from a more synoptic perspective that takes different dimensions of technologically-induced transformations into assessment. Only understanding processes and their effects can scholars accurately account for the wide-ranging and puzzling outcomes of digitization in different political contexts – and it is an in-depth knowledge of such transformations that can further enhance the ability of democratic policymakers to identify and translate new concepts and frameworks into practices that safeguard the functioning of democracies.

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