

From State Censorship to Hybrid Governance: The Evolution of Political Control in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how political censorship has evolved from a predominantly state-centred practice into a hybrid system of governance involving governments, private technology companies, and algorithmic systems. It argues that the rise of digital communication has transformed censorship from the direct suppression of speech into the regulation of visibility, information flows and public discourse through platform governance, and algorithmic moderation. The paper first develops a conceptual framework that reconceptualises censorship beyond traditional state control before applying this framework to authoritarian and democratic contexts. China demonstrates how legal regulation, platform governance, and algorithmic surveillance operate together to reinforce state authority, while the cases of Meta and India illustrate how democratic societies increasingly shape political discourse through private moderation systems and digital regulation. Although significant differences remain between democratic and authoritarian regimes, the findings suggest that both increasingly rely on interconnected digital infrastructures to influence political communication, challenging conventional understandings of censorship, and political control in the digital age.

Keywords: political censorship, hybrid governance, algorithmic governance, digital platforms, freedom of expression

INTRODUCTION

History preserves the stories of the remembered, victors and villains alike, but how these figures are remembered depends on the information that survives them. Written texts, testimonies, ideas, and speeches shape collective memory and understanding. When access to such information is restricted or shaped, it alters the way history, politics, and power are perceived; more importantly, it alters how they operate in the present. The suppression, alteration, or prohibition of speech, writing, art, or other forms of communication by authorities such as governments or organizations - more commonly known as censorship - has long been used as a tool of control. While historically associated with dictators, censorship in the digital age has permeated all forms of governance and is increasingly mediated through

online platforms and private technology companies. So the question stands: who is Big Brother and how much are they watching?

The assumption that censorship is limited to authoritarian regimes is increasingly untenable in the digital era. Censorship no longer operates solely through overt state repression but instead through a hybrid model of control involving governments, private technology companies, and algorithmic systems. Social media platforms shape discourse through content moderation policies and internal structures that can dictate what information you're exposed to. Instead of silencing speech outright, these platforms often limit expression by reducing its visibility. While these practices are hallmarks of dictatorship, they have begun to operate in democratic societies with constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech. These protections do not fully apply to private tech companies, which allows platform-mediated power to complicate traditional understandings of political freedom.

Existing scholarship extensively examines censorship within authoritarian regimes, platform governance, algorithmic moderation and freedom of expression as largely separate areas of inquiry. Research has explored state-led censorship in countries such as China, the governance of online speech by technology companies and the growing influence of algorithmic recommendation systems on public discourse. That said, comparatively little work has integrated these perspectives within a single analytical framework that examines how censorship now operates through the interaction between states, private platforms and algorithmic systems across both authoritarian and democratic regimes. By answering the research question - **To what extent has political censorship evolved into a hybrid system of control that involves states, private platforms, and algorithmic governance in both authoritarian and democratic regimes?** - this paper contributes to the literature by synthesizing these previously separate strands into the concept of hybrid governance and evaluating how political control increasingly emerges through the combined operation of these actors rather than through the state alone.

To achieve the aforementioned, this paper adopts a qualitative secondary research approach. It synthesizes academic literature, legal and policy documents, reports from international organizations, and contemporary news sources to develop a conceptual framework for understanding hybrid censorship. The framework is then applied through comparative case studies of China, Meta, and India to evaluate how interactions between governments, private technology companies, and algorithmic systems shape political communication across both authoritarian and democratic contexts.

UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL CENSORSHIP

Traditionally, censorship has been defined as a sovereign act of the state, usually carried out through direct government intervention. Governments used laws, state ownership, or coercive repression to enforce this rule, with force integrated into their governance style (Hem, 2014). The most common example of this is Nazi Germany, with its style of censorship becoming more overt as the reign went on. In the beginning, they controlled what was written in the newspapers and said over the radio, which

evolved into public book burnings in the 1930s (Biscontini, 2023). Through the use of force, a clear distinction emerged: authoritarian systems institutionalize repression, while liberal democracies constrain it through protections such as free speech and the judiciary. This creates a state-centric model where censorship is a traceable form of political authority.

However, with the advent of social media, the public sphere has expanded, which complicates this model. Censorship is no longer dependent solely on newspapers or radio to spread political information. Moreover, the discourse has moved from small groups to online forums and discussions, which can involve hundreds of people. While this does increase the scope of the discourse, it also allows for the discussion to be embedded within social media platforms. These platforms are governed not only by public law but also by internal governance and terms of service, meaning they have direct authority over content visibility and moderation. This means that the power to regulate speech is no longer solely in the government's hands but is increasingly exercised by private systems (Yachu, 2025).

This shift allows for a new form of control, known as algorithmic governance, which ranks and filters content according to its own metrics, such as the amount of interaction it receives (Gorwa et al., 2020). This means that censorship can act as deplatforming or amplifying certain voices over others. As a result, the distinction between free and censored speech becomes more complicated, as speech may formally remain free, yet its reach is shaped by the structure of the platforms themselves. In doing so, censorship becomes more infrastructural, intertwined with digital systems (Lymn & Bancroft, 2021). As a result of these systems, power over political discourse lies in the ability to manipulate attention and visibility, thereby influencing what users engage with and how they interact. Through this, it becomes clear that censorship has evolved beyond state-imposed restrictions to controlling what ideas people are exposed to (Cobbe, 2020). This reconceptualizes censorship as a form of indirect systemic governance implemented through restrictions on online spaces.

Thus, contemporary censorship can be seen as operating through a system involving algorithms, private platforms, and the state, showcasing how the act of censoring information arises at the intersection of these key players (Lymn & Bancroft, 2021). While states continue to play a key role in shaping laws and regulations governing what content can be shown to the public, it is private companies that interpret these laws. In doing so, they exercise a form of authority over the public sphere. Accordingly, it is the algorithms that execute these forms of control through monitoring everyday user interactions (Micham, 2025). This highlights how the relationship between these players is mutually reinforcing. Crucially, as this form of authority transcends traditional definitions of censorship and political control, similar methods can be observed in both democratic and authoritarian contexts. Authoritarian systems may still rely more heavily on direct intervention, as seen in Venezuela, where the Lotel Law regulates broadcast frequencies and prohibits foreign media production or broadcasting within the country (Hem, 2014). Whereas democratic systems may achieve similar outcomes through algorithmic systems and private governance. This leads to the distinction between the two systems of governance becoming more blurred. Consequently, differentiating the two lies in the government's control over these pathways and in the

justification given for such actions (Maerz, 2025). Ultimately, the rise of digital and social media platforms has complicated the relationship between the two forms of governance regarding censorship.

POLITICAL CENSORSHIP IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Authoritarianism is a political system characterized by the concentration of power in a central authority and the absence of political plurality (Lindstaedt, 2024). This is characterized by strong central authority, where power is held by a single leader, a small elite, a military junta, or a single ruling party. These forms of governance also exert strong control over the media and use propaganda to shape the public narrative, prioritizing obedience and social control over democratic representation. Authoritarianism, despite similarities, differs from totalitarianism, an extreme form of authoritarianism in which the government seeks to control almost every aspect of people's lives (Duignan, 2018). This can range from politics to personal beliefs. In totalitarian regimes, there is one powerful leader or party, no real opposition, heavy censorship, and punishment for dissent. Despite the similarities, authoritarian regimes focus on preserving political authority and managing dissent that threatens stability.

Historically, within these systems, censorship was overt, a highly centralized state action, making it a direct form of coercion (Liu & Chang, 2021). One example of this is the Hundred Flowers Campaign that took place in China from May 1956 to July 1957. This initially encouraged intellectuals to criticize the state, but later shifted toward suppressing dissent through the Anti-Rightist Campaign. This crackdown targeted intellectuals, students, and critics, labeling them as "rightists" to purge them from society. Oftentimes, they were publicly humiliated, dismissed from their jobs and universities, and forced to perform grueling manual labor in rural areas or sent to prison (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016). This illustrates how authoritarian regimes can permit and discipline political expression to reinforce state authority (Tapscott, 2021). Similarly, in the Soviet Union, under Stalin, the state had strict monopolies over publishing, broadcasting, and education. These were used alongside censorship, which, in this case, relied heavily on historical revisionism and ideological propaganda to consolidate political authority. Through events like the Great Purge, dissent was suppressed and erased from public memory, demonstrating how authoritarian control encompassed not only the silencing of opposition but also the reshaping of collective understanding itself.

The rise of digital media and algorithmic governance has changed the methods of censorship, but not its aim. Where it used to be distinct and highly visible, today censorship has become embedded in technology. China is a good example of this, with the "Great Firewall" acting as a tool for digital censorship. It blocks global platforms like Google and Meta while simultaneously using AI to suppress content that is politically sensitive or economically pessimistic on independently organized domestic platforms such as WeChat and Weibo (Law, 2026). This showcases how censorship today not only regulates what information can be shared but also how information circulates, gains visibility, and reaches audiences. It is important to note that this model does not rely on outright removal of content; the "Great Firewall" actively reshapes the online sphere, determining what information is visible and what spreads to the people within the country. This is further reinforced by the requirement that social media companies in

China comply with state regulations and actively participate in content moderation (Peron et al., 2025). In doing so, a system is created in which private platforms are integrated into state governance structures and help suppress ideas and content, showcasing how censorship has evolved into a partnership. Algorithms are used to identify sensitive material, suppress discussions, and amplify state-approved narratives, thus allowing censorship to occur rapidly and invisibly. Consequently, political control becomes embedded within digital communication itself, making censorship less identifiable as a singular act of repression and more characteristic of an ongoing system of information management (Peron et al., 2025).

The implementation of digital censorship in China reveals the extent to which state power can be fused with the governance of private tech companies. The digital command system in China differs from older models of censorship in which the state relied on direct oppression and a state-run media monopoly. Contemporary Chinese digital censorship is instead the result of laws that require tech companies to manage politically sensitive information and activities. A prime example is the 2017 Cybersecurity Law, which was enacted by the Cyberspace Administration of China. This law mandates that companies in the Internet and social media sectors must manage online content, remove politically sensitive material, provide the state with such content, and implement a system requiring online users to register their real identities. Complying with the law allows the company to operate in China. If a company fails to comply, it may be shut down or banned from China (Protiviti, 2018). With the enforcement of such laws, private communication platforms cease to function as communication platforms and become tools of state censorship and surveillance.

This became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Various social media platforms in China were monitored and censored for discussions related to the virus. The Citizen Lab report, *Censored Contagion*, explained how WeChat, among other platforms, designed and implemented automated systems to censor specific keywords, including references to the COVID-19 pandemic, critiques of the state, and issues related to the public health system. The removal and restriction of online content included discussions of government whistleblowers, critiques of government responses, and other politically sensitive issues. This censorship was predominantly carried out proactively by automated frameworks that prevented information from going viral (Reuters, 2020). This form of governance demonstrates the capability of political control to be seamless and expansive. They also continued to modify the technology to control and comply with the state's requests. In this instance, censorship has shifted to firms and their infrastructure systems, and the state has become less directly visible. In the digital age, authoritarian governance has had to adapt, incorporating legal systems and corporate governance to control what information can be accessed and how it can be regulated.

It is evident that although the aims of political control have remained largely unchanged throughout history, the ways in which control is enforced have changed significantly in the digital age. Authoritarian control used to focus on overt, direct state control over the media through monopolistic control, legal prohibition, and physical punishment of dissent. The age of digital communication and social media has ushered in a new form of control embedded in governance structures and infrastructure. The Chinese case shows that the emerging form of control combines state governance, corporate governance of platforms,

and algorithmic control. This form of control is more continuous, scalable, and less coercive because of mechanisms such as the Cybersecurity Law, coercive legal controls on platforms, and automated algorithmic controls on platforms. State control no longer needs to rely on overt censorship of speech and dissent, but can be exercised in subtler forms through control of digital political speech.

POLITICAL CENSORSHIP IN DEMOCRATIC REGIMES

Traditionally, democratic systems are seen as less susceptible to employing censorship; a democracy, by definition, is a system of governance in which power resides with the people, allowing them to participate in decision-making processes, typically through voting. It emphasizes principles such as equality, freedom, and justice, fostering political engagement and representation (Theil, 2022). Unlike authoritarian regimes, democracies have legal mechanisms, constitutional practices, and the press to limit the state's power to suppress political speech directly. Democracies are also constrained by legal frameworks designed to protect dissent and public debate. Thus, censorship has historically been seen as incompatible with democratic governments. However, this distinction has been complicated by political discourse shifting onto private platforms (Theil, 2022). With this shift, the government is no longer solely responsible for regulating free speech, as political communication is increasingly mediated by private technology companies and algorithmic systems. Thus, creating new mechanisms through which information can be controlled and restricted, which suggests that censorship can diffuse through other forms of governance.

As social media platforms have become one of the main sources wherein citizens consume and engage with news, company policies regarding content moderation and recommendation systems can influence which political perspectives gain visibility (Gillespie, 2018). Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, is one example of this. As they have billions of users worldwide, they can influence how these users interact with news, information, and how they engage with that content. Consequently, Meta's policies surrounding content moderation can influence not only what information is available but also what information becomes politically and socially relevant. The significance of Meta's ability to censor information goes beyond simply removing content or censoring keywords and criticisms (Klonick, 2018), as seen in the example of China. A large chunk of Meta's influence comes from its engagement-driven recommendation systems. These systems determine which information users encounter and which remains largely unseen, and they tend to rely more on engagement and user activity than on civic value or democratic importance. As a result, political influence is controlled mainly by managing the visibility of content rather than outright prohibition. In 2021, a whistleblower, Frank Haugen, revealed that there were internal conflicts over the role that Facebook's algorithms had in amplifying the amount of polarization seen within society, as the emotionally charged, divisive videos were being spread faster by the algorithm as they gained more engagement (Horwitz, 2021). Thus revealing how platform design can shape public discourse without directly censoring speech. In this context, political power lies not only in deciding what information can be expressed, but in determining which information receives attention and reaches large audiences. Moreover, private platforms are becoming increasingly relevant in the political sphere as a means of gaining more support and followers. Thus, during times that are politically relevant, like

elections, there is a huge increase in the amount that is invested in advertising across platforms. During the 2024 US elections, an estimated 1.35 billion dollars was spent on buying ads on Google and Meta (Vandewalker & Petry, 2024). Thus, showcasing how companies like Meta occupy a complicated position as they are both a private company and a platform where politics is conducted, demonstrating how control over information and political discourse, especially, is moving out of government spheres and into the digital environments.

While private platforms are exercising more influence over political discourse, governments still play an important role. Unlike authoritarian systems, where censorship is often imposed through direct state control, these interventions are generally justified on the grounds of combating misinformation and protecting national interests. India offers an insight into how this can work, as it is the world's largest democracy; the country maintains constitutional protections for freedom of expression and competitive political institutions. However, the rapid growth of social media has led to tighter regulation of what can be published and said online. A significant example is India's Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code), which was implemented in 2021. These regulations allowed the Indian government to have more authority over digital platforms. They required platforms to move certain forms of content at the government's request and to provide mechanisms for identifying people who create content deemed unlawful (MEITY, 2021). This prompts platforms to regulate content in advance to avoid legal issues, showcasing how private platforms serve as intermediaries through which state agendas can influence the visibility of information. As a result, the question of the extent to which democratic governments should be allowed to interfere in digital communication is raised; as India itself has been criticized for its use of digital shutdowns in times of crisis (Bajoria, 2023).

Both the examples of India and Meta have highlighted how democratic governments do still play a role in shaping and determining the spread of information; they are no longer the sole gatekeepers of it. The rise in algorithmic governance and the increasing power that social media companies hold over shaping political discourse have created new mechanisms through which content can be influenced and moderated. While democratic societies continue to maintain stronger protections for freedom of expression than authoritarian regimes, the growing interaction between governments and private technology companies complicates traditional understandings of censorship. Thus, the regulation of information is increasingly characterized by a hybrid system of governance that extends beyond the state alone (De Gregorio & Radu, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Censorship is the suppression, alteration, or prohibition of speech, writing, art, or other forms of communication by authorities such as governments or organizations, and it has gone through numerous changes throughout the digital era. Censorship has evolved beyond its traditional association with overt state repression into a more complex system of governance. While some authoritarian states like China continue to implement more overt means of censorship, such as the Great Firewall or the 2017

Cybersecurity Law, the mechanisms through which control is exercised have shifted toward more technologically embedded ones. These systems have evolved to include digital platforms, surveillance technologies, and algorithmic governance. At the same time, censorship within democratic societies has been slowly increasing through the inclusion of regulatory frameworks that affect the visibility, circulation, and accessibility of political information. This can be seen with India's Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code), which allows it to have greater control over the media. The case of Meta showcases how censorship is being increasingly built into systems that we use in our daily lives, through algorithms like the recommendation system that builds your For You page on Instagram. While these practices differ in their legal foundations and levels of accountability, they demonstrate that control over political discourse is no longer exercised solely by governments.

Thus, these cases highlight the significant extent to which contemporary censorship operates through numerous interactions between states, private platforms and algorithms, which play an important role in shaping the spread of information today. Consequently, the distinction between authoritarian and democratic control over information has been blurred significantly, as both rely on platform-mediated governance to control the spread of information. This does not suggest that democracies have become authoritarian, but rather that the digital era has created new routes through which political power and information can be spread. Ultimately, censorship in the twenty-first century requires moving beyond state-centered definitions and recognizing how power is increasingly embedded within the technology and platforms that govern modern communication.

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