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Defending The Free And Open Internet In An Age Of Authoritarianism

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BACKGROUND

The free and open internet has been getting less free and less open in recent years. Stopping this erosion and reversing the tide should be a foreign policy priority of liberal democratic leaders around the globe. There is a real risk that the considerable social and economic benefits the internet has brought people across the globe are under threat from a new model of control online, one that seeks to restrict peoples' rights, hobble competition in markets, and put up new borders.

The meeting of the G7 leaders this week in Cornwall will rightly focus on global health coordination, and attempt to renew institutions and modes of international collaboration that have been left wanting. But there is also a new opportunity for these digitally advanced nations (with the welcome addition, next week, of South Korea, India, Australia, and South Africa) to imagine a new vision of the internet that can support prosperous, open, and progressive societies. And reports this week about plans for a bilateral US-EU "Trade and Technology Council" are a welcome sign that international coordination in defense of the open internet is beginning to take shape.¹

THE NET GREW UP

The pioneers of the early internet and their followers are rightly worried that their utopian vision of a decentralized global internet protocol has been eroded.² They are worried by several trends, including walled gardens in the form of tech company monoliths, ad tech tracking, diverging regulation on online safety, and most importantly by new authoritarian models of internet shutdowns, censorship, and control. They are worried that their great 'democratizing'

invention is working towards the opposite — closing down societies and being used as a tool for control and surveillance.

For decades, China's "great firewall" has prevented most foreign tech companies from entering the domestic market (that's why Chinese internet users can't access Google, Facebook, or Twitter).³ Now, the same restrictive policies toward platforms and websites are spreading to other countries. Nigeria banned Twitter after the company removed a tweet from President Muhammadu Buhari for violating its "abusive behavior" policy.⁴ In another conflict, police officers from India's elite antiterrorism unit raided Twitter's (empty) office in New Delhi after the social media company labeled some posts from the ruling party as "manipulated media."⁵

The advocates for greater control of the internet are not uniform in their views. They range from worthy proponents of greater child safety online to authoritarian states cracking down on internal dissent. Failure to find substantive answers to the problems of misinformation, child exploitation, and culturally specific moderation, for example, have left an opening for those who claim these societal issues can be dealt with by banning encryption, removing anonymity, or keeping data within national borders.

Some open internet advocates wish for a return to the libertarian 'state of nature' of the early internet, but this is not realistic and conflicts with the majority of people who have a more complex view of the intersection of technology and society.⁶ While the technology revolution should ultimately be a cause for optimism, it has undoubtedly and demonstrably brought considerable harm into our public and private spaces. Regulation of content, standards, and ethics is part of the internet's future and part of global cooperation at this regulatory, ethical, and

social policy layer in the internet stack.

Sensible policy makers know that counteracting the harms from digital services — privacy violations, hate speech, and foreign interference in elections — requires regulation that seeks to harness and protect a free and open internet, not rules that attempt to close down and restrict communication. Indeed, some have argued convincingly that a “mostly open” internet can maximize the economic and social value of the internet.⁷

In advanced economies, greater weight needs to be placed on international cooperation in areas such as antitrust reform, AI governance and ethics, and content moderation. While there will always be region-specific issues, it is in the interest of a productive and effective global internet economy to find areas for international alignment. The easy choice for the most recent wave of populists is to put up new digital borders, which will restrict trade and the free flow of digital goods and services. But one of the great benefits of the internet is that services are available to those outside of the markets they were originally designed for.

And because the costs of differentiating digital products across national or regional borders are quite high, the internet is an ecosystem that is very sensitive to the “Brussels effect.”⁸ Essentially, any regulatory body with control over a sufficiently large market size (typically, this has been the EU) can ratchet up the regulatory standard for the whole world because it’s cheaper to create a product or service once and then deploy it worldwide. On privacy issues, the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation has become the de facto set of rules for multinational technology platforms because it’s too costly to engineer multiple versions to comply with lower standards

elsewhere. Similarly, on antitrust policy, if the EU blocks a merger in its jurisdiction, as it did with the Honeywell and General Electric tie-up in 2000, it can make the deal fall apart completely.⁹ For this reason, international cooperation on internet rules and standards is essential for preventing the most onerous set of rules from becoming the default

INTERNET FOR EMERGING ECONOMIES

In emerging economies, what is most concerning is that the authoritarian model of control is quickly becoming the go-to model, with little resistance from the United States and its allies. The playbook of shutting down the internet during times of crisis has been repeated in Iran, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Myanmar. According to Access Now, a non-profit digital rights group, 29 countries shut down or slowed their internet at least 155 times in 2020.¹⁰

Quite apart from the human rights implications of internet shutdowns and what they enable states to get away with, there are broader economic and social implications of the closed model. If you shut down the internet, you pause your country’s e-commerce. If you require data sovereignty, meaning user data must be localized in your country, you lose the benefits of cloud infrastructure outside of your geographical borders (the three largest cloud providers in the world are all American companies — Amazon, Microsoft, and Google).¹¹

So we are at a tipping point, where leaders in liberal democracies need to make the basic case for an economic and social model that still has the capacity to build open, prosperous, and inclusive societies around the world. Until now, the West and its allies have watched the retrenchment of the internet and done very little. To take just

one example, it is disappointing that at this late stage of the 5G rollout, there is still no US or UK competitor to China's Huawei (the only viable alternatives at the moment are Finland's Nokia and Sweden's Ericsson).¹²

China has been quick to offer emerging economies the financing and internet infrastructure where others have been unable to, particularly with Huawei being the global leader in 5G technology. Yet it is simplistic to think that the answer is simply to adopt a liberal-mirror strategy to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Western countries have different core competencies and citizens living in democracies may not be willing to tolerate the kind of resource transfers the Chinese Communist Party is engaging in. But liberal democracies should prioritise providing the necessary support and moreover they can exert competitive pressure through their own investments, trade, and cooperation. They can advocate for competitive markets in economies around the world. And they can help their cutting-edge firms expand fairly and responsibly in new digital markets, in turn providing the digital platforms and services upon which businesses, both physical and digital, can build their own futures.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE

There is a new administration in the US and the UK is looking to realize what a new Global Britain actually means in practice, presenting an opportunity for a reset. The US as a technological superpower, and the UK an e-commerce heavyweight, should be championing that defense. Here's a blueprint for what that could look like:¹³

First, invest in infrastructure and access to close the digital divide by 2030. The investment necessary to close the digital divide by 2030 is

approximately \$450 billion.¹⁴ To put this cost in perspective, raising these funds would require member countries of the Development Assistance Committee — an arm of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) — to contribute 0.02 percent of their gross national income (GNI) per year — a small price to pay for a foundational investment that would enable low- and middle-income countries to forge their own paths to prosperity and expand the global internet economy to everyone's benefit.

A key part of closing the digital divide should be enabling censorship-resistant infrastructure that is available around the globe through satellites. Companies like SpaceX, OneWeb, Viasat, and SES are building massive constellations of satellites with the goal of providing low latency, low cost internet access around the world. But global coordination on satellite slots and spectrum allocation between allied nations through the International Telecommunications Union will be critical for securing speedy deployment. Importantly, these firms can provide a liberal counterbalance to Huawei in providing internet access to the developing world without the fear of compromised infrastructure.

Second, liberal democracies should expand trading relationships and investment opportunities in the broader internet ecosystem, particularly elements that boost demand for internet services in emerging economies. On the technology side, this means policy to incentivise investment in servers and core infrastructure that make the internet more reliable, as well as investment in software (e.g., payment and cybersecurity systems) as the modern infrastructure that helps facilitate advanced economies. It should also mean facilitating trade in cultural goods - supporting the cultural and

social vibrancy of online communities can help grow digital economies from the ground up. Investing in creative sectors in 2021 has never been more cost effective with modern digital tools and platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. There are positive externalities of greater consumption of digital cultural goods such as the build out of content delivery networks (CDNs) that can both deliver entertainment, social media videos, and education or e-commerce services. The aim should be for the internet giants' network of CDNs around the world to look more like it does in North America and in Europe.¹⁵

Third, liberal democracies need to consider how public investments can shape the competitive terrain of emerging digital technologies like artificial intelligence so that they are compatible with liberal values.¹⁶ As it currently stands, the lack of privacy protections in China is commonly thought to provide the country with a structural advantage in AI development because they can massively gather data on the behavior and actions of their citizens. However, this structural advantage could be offset by greater public investment in machine learning techniques that rely less on real world data collection, such as simulation learning or one-shot learning.¹⁷ Similarly, public investment to improve the viability of interpretability, fairness, and privacy techniques can shift the adoption curve within the field of AI research before path dependence sets in. In other words, if we invest today in open-access research that makes it easier to achieve high-performance algorithms that are privacy-preserving and are intuitive to human understanding, it's more likely that the AI tools which ultimately win out will have those features. An international AI research institute with ambitious public funding would be well positioned to make progress on these competitive terrain questions.

Fourth, Western countries should increase their investment in the organizations that develop and manage internet standards and protocols such as HTTP, SMTP, and IRC. These protocols were foundational to the early internet, but recent advances in functionality and usability have come from platforms owned by private companies. The Internet Society (ISOC), a non-profit organization that provides leadership in internet-related standards and policy, needs more resources and should be tasked with building a more ambitious vision for the future of the internet that prioritizes protocols over platforms.¹⁸ The more functionality that can be built into the protocol layer of the internet, the harder it will be for oppressive governments to control or censor users (companies have offices that can be raided; protocols don't).¹⁹ Platforms can then be built on top of these protocols and offer competing implementations that take or leave different pieces of content. An internet built on protocols rather than platforms is a fundamentally more open and democratic version of the internet.

The G7 Digital & Technology Ministerial Declaration, is an important step in recognising the importance of internet standards, but this needs to go further in more proactive, coordinated resistance to authoritarian Chinese proposals.²⁰

Finally, establish new global frameworks on AI, content moderation, and antitrust. The largest internet platforms should be held to a higher standard of transparency and due process for users to increase trust and minimize harms. To make these new rules stick, policymakers should engage in a multi-stakeholder process to build consensus around best practices and then mandate them by law (with adequately resourced enforcement agencies to make sure companies follow through on their commitments). The complexity and scale of these multinational

technology ecosystems means that enforceable global standards will never become a reality without co-opting the largest private sector organisations in their governance.

The EU-U.S. Trade and Technology Council (TTC), expected to be announced next week, is a positive first step towards joint standards and collaboration. But if it is going to be long-lasting and impactful it must be backed by strong multi-lateral institutions, clear and detailed regulatory frameworks, and the capacity to expand to include other like-minded allies.

CONCLUSION

The vision of an open, inclusive, and prosperous internet is more than a marketing job for liberal democracies (though that is important as well). The West and its allies need to use its coordinating capacity and soft power along with concerted investment in access and infrastructure to defend an internet that still has enormous capacity to create prosperity and provide economic and social liberation. The leaders of the G7 must see the future of democracy as fundamentally entwined with the future of the internet. Even more, as the Biden administration prepares for its Summit for Democracies at the end of 2021, re-establishing the US leadership of the free world, must mean building an ethical, responsible, but ultimately free internet as well.

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ENDNOTES

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