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# Call for Papers: Special Issue of the *Journal of Online Trust and Safety*

## Authoritarian Regimes and Online Safety

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Although the internet was predicted to undermine non-democratic regimes, numerous studies have shown that, instead, dictators have skillfully used the internet to strengthen their control over society. Autocrats have employed both overt and covert tactics to promote their narratives online, and have applied these tactics to both domestic and international audiences. A growing body of research shows that under some circumstances, autocrats' influence operations achieve their intended effects—shaping people's views and behavior in favor of the regime within and beyond the regime's borders. Non-state societal actors (e.g., citizens, firms, criminal groups) in autocracies also inflict online harms such as harassment, hate speech, and fraud, either under regime supervision or on their own.

Online harms inside authoritarian regimes and perpetrated by authoritarian rulers are in some ways distinct from those in democratic countries. First, due to the lack of independent and diverse information sources (e.g., independent journalistic reporting and academic research) and the lack of transparency in government's decision-making processes, citizens living under autocracy may find it more difficult to detect online harms (e.g., disinformation) and attribute harm activities to the responsible perpetrators (e.g., disseminators of child abuse images). Second, compared to their democratic counterparts, autocrats may be able to mobilize resources much faster and at a much larger scale to conduct operations that compromise online safety. Third, there are fewer credible and powerful institutions to punish authoritarian rulers (e.g., free elections, independent legislatures) when they cause online harms. Authoritarian regimes may also have weaker and biased institutions to sanction non-state actors who create online harms. For example, those with government connections may be less likely to be prosecuted for cybercrime. In these ways, both state-facilitated and non-state-facilitated online safety issues can be more widespread and impactful in authoritarian contexts compared to democratic contexts.

The burgeoning literature on authoritarian regimes and online safety calls for new, innovative, and rigorous research to advance our knowledge on this important topic. Existing studies mostly focus on propaganda and censorship by dictators, yet spam, fraud, harassment, and surveillance operations perpetuated by state and non-state actors have received little research attention. Another gap to be filled is the heterogeneity in dictators' tactics and narratives across different audiences and online platforms. Moreover, research on the consequences of online harms caused by state and societal actors in non-democracies remains scant.

### 1 Special issue

We invite researchers across disciplines to submit their work for a special issue on Authoritarian Regimes and Online Safety. Questions that authors might address include (but are not limited to):

- How do autocrats use the internet to cultivate support for their regimes?
- How do autocrats use digital surveillance to suppress political dissent?
- Do online harms facilitated by non-state actors (e.g., cybercrime, harassment) in authoritarian countries differ from those in democratic countries, and if so, in what ways?
- What are the political/economic/psychological drivers of autocrats' online influence operations?
- What is the impact of artificial intelligence technologies (e.g., automated content moderation, predictive policing) on citizen political participation in non-democracies (e.g., protests, engagement with government officials, collective petitions)?
- How do autocrats use narratives and tactics online to advance their interests across time/platforms/audiences, and why?
- How do digital surveillance technologies employed by the state shape citizen sentiment/behavior in authoritarian regimes?
- Under what conditions does law enforcement investigate or prosecute non-state-facilitated online abuses?
- Under what circumstances are autocrats' online influence operations effective at winning hearts and minds? Under what circumstances do their operations backfire and incite regime opposition?
- What interventions can reduce online harms created by state/non-state actors in authoritarian regimes?

## 2 Submission instructions

Authors interested in submitting an article for the special issue should follow the journal's [standard submission process](#). Authors may send a letter of inquiry to assess if the paper would be a good fit. Full paper submissions for the special issue are due November 1, 2023, and if accepted will be published in April 2024. Questions about the special issue may be directed to [trustandsafetyjournal@stanford.edu](mailto:trustandsafetyjournal@stanford.edu).

## 3 Timeline

- Full paper submission deadline: November 1, 2023
- Desk decisions: November 6, 2023
- Publication date of special issue: April 2024