Online Harassment in Authoritarian and Semi-democratic States

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Existing literature on online safety issues in authoritarian and semi-democratic states has focused on state-facilitated harms. This special issue expands on this work by examining online harassment by individuals who may have connections to the state but deliberately obscure these ties. Restrictions on press freedom and limited transparency in government decision-making processes mean individuals encounter greater challenges in making sense of coordinated online harms and attributing these activities to the responsible parties. However, given that authoritarian rule fundamentally relies on repression, determining whether state actors are orchestrating these activities holds significant implications for their targets. Articles in this issue make valuable contributions to this emerging field of research by describing the mechanics of pro-government harassment campaigns in non-democratic contexts.

1 A Scarcity of Research on State-Society Coordination for Online Harassment

In non-democratic regimes, the boundary between state and non-state activities is generally fuzzier compared to democratic systems, given the regime's tighter control and deeper penetration into society (Linz 2000; Scott 1990; Wedeen 1998). For example, previous research has shown that autocrats mobilize the domestic public to fabricate pro-regime social media posts with the goal of crowding out online dissent (Han 2015; King, Pan, and Roberts 2017).

While this work has investigated how states secretly work with societal groups for disinformation campaigns, less attention has been paid to the mechanics of coordinated online harassment and the implications for the political attitudes and behavior of those targeted. A handful of studies assess the systematic effect of state repression on online dissent (Esberg and Siegel 2023; Hobbs and Roberts 2018), but little research has delved into how dissidents experiencing online harms conceptualize their experience. Importantly, we lack insight into how the targets of coordinated harassment assess the role of state actors in their experiences, which may shape how they respond to such adversities. Using in-depth interviews with targets of coordinated online harassment under authoritarian or semi-democratic rule, articles in this special issue illuminate

the nuanced experiences and perspectives of these individuals, shedding light on their strategies for navigating these complex digital landscapes.

2   Why Should We Care?

Understanding coordinated online harms in these contexts is important for several reasons. From the regime's perspective, mobilizing non-state actors to orchestrate or support coordinated attacks may present a more attractive option due to its cost-effectiveness and the ability to distance itself from direct blame. By utilizing non-state proxies, governments can mitigate accountability and evade scrutiny if these online operations are uncovered (DiResta, Grossman, and Siegel 2022; Pan and Zhang 2022).

Additionally, collaboration with non-state actors may prove to be more efficacious than purely state-led endeavors in undermining targeted dissidents for two reasons. First, by leveraging a broad array of cross-societal partners, state-society coordinated activities may have a wider reach within a country compared to activities conducted only by state actors (Stockmann 2012; Wang and Tan 2023; Zhai and Wang 2024). Second, these coordinated activities may appear more legitimate if they are perceived to be independent of state orchestration (Brockling, Hu, and Fu 2023; Roberts 2018).

3   New Findings on Coordinated Harassment

Using both qualitative and quantitative data, the two articles in this special issue provide new and important insights into coordinated online harassment in authoritarian and semi-democratic regimes.

In "*Wangbao* (Cyberbullying) and *Jubao* (Reporting): Strategic Ambiguity in Collaborative State-Society Influence Operations in China," Kecheng Fang argues that in online harassment against dissidents, the deliberate ambiguity in regime responsibility grants the state more flexibility and plausible deniability. By studying 25 cases of cyberbullying and mass reporting (where many social media users report the same—often non-violative—content to a platform) through interviews and an original survey of harassment campaign targets, the author synthesizes the strategies targets use to discern between state vs. non-state harassment. Based on these first-hand victim experiences, the author proposes a typology of three levels of state involvement in online harassment in autocracies. The article highlights the importance of recognizing the use of strategic ambiguity in coordinated harassment as a distinct form of state-society partnership.

In "Proactive Blocking through the Automated Identification of Likely Harassers," Ifat Gazia, Trevor Hubbard, Timothy Scalona, Yena Kang, and Ethan Zuckerman investigate

mass reporting and doxxing targeting Kashmiri activists on X (formerly Twitter). By interviewing six Kashmiri dissidents, the authors describe how these dissidents detect Hindu nationalist harassers among users who interact with them on X. Using a sample of harasser accounts provided by the interviewees, the authors build a filtering model by leveraging text analysis and social network analysis. This model can preemptively identify and filter potentially harassing social media posts and is applicable to other minority communities beyond Kashmir and on platforms beyond X.

4   Future Research

In this special issue, we emphasize the importance of considering state-society coordinated online harassment and examining the mechanics of their collaboration in the study of authoritarian and semi-democratic regimes. The papers in this issue do an excellent job of laying out important research questions and obtaining firsthand and valuable perspectives from targets of these campaigns.

Future research could investigate the downstream effects on these targets. How do these experiences shape individuals' perceptions of the regime and their fellow citizens? Do these individuals alter their level of activism on social media platforms, and if so, in what ways?

We also need more research on the identities and motivations of non-state actors who participate in these campaigns against political dissidents. Questions regarding the material, ideological, and psychological drivers behind such behavior warrant investigation. How does the experience of participating in these efforts shape the political opinions and behaviors of these individuals? Do participants experience ideological shifts or develop empathy towards dissidents?

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