Expert group for the EU Observatory on the online platform economy

Work stream 6: Use of platforms technologies (big data and AI) in autocratic countries

Concept note

1. Policy context

In Western democracies, big data, data analytics, and artificial intelligence (henceforth summarily referred to as "platform technologies") have shattered many existing industries and developed new ones. They have also affected the sphere of politics, notably via the possibility to microtarget voters and to obfuscate the identity of the senders of political messages, which have facilitated the spread of disinformation, the creation of echo chambers, and the increase of political polarization.[1]

The same technologies are also widely used in autocratic countries. While the major players in the West are privately-owned big tech firms, in autocratic countries the government assumes a much more active role, both via state-owned enterprises and via market interventions. For instance, in China face-recognition technologies are widely used[2] (and the collected masses of data are analyzed with machine-learning techniques and exchanged between private and public players[3]). Lately, private technology firms in China have experienced strong governmental interventions, which have partly led to collapses of stocks and to fears about independence of the contents exchanged via the Internet.[4] These developments evoke a discussion, started about 10 years ago, about the net effects of internet access for the spread of liberal, democratic values[5] – just at a higher level because platform technologies have become so much more effective today.

Complementing its use of platform technologies, China's PIPL (Personal Information Protection Law) is influenced by the GDPR yet does not benefit from the same counterpart as the EU's LED (Law Enforcement Directive). It is unclear, however, to which extent the PIPL is considered strategic because it talks of international data flows but in light of certain conditions that might impede IP. Its focus is not on fundamental rights of individuals but on a broader vision of "competitive advantage" for China as a country. And this while some form of accountability for private entities is there, but not in the light of fundamental rights.[6]

2. Research/Policy questions and methodology

We intend to start focusing on developments in China, as the technologically most advanced autocratic state. Only if at a later point of time we learn that other autocratic countries are significantly different (but still worthwhile being researched) and if we still have time/capacity left then, we will also look at other countries.

Broad questions guiding our research are:

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[1] See references in Van Gils, Freek, Müller, Wieland and Jens Prüfer. 2020. « Big Data and Democracy, » TILEC Discussion Paper No. 2020-003.

[2] Strittmatter, Kai. 2020. *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State*. Harper Collins.

[3] Beraja, Martin, Yang, David Y. and Noam Yuchtman. 2021. « Data-intensive Innovation and the State: Evidence from AI Firms in China, » NBER WP.

[4] See e.g. The Economist, 14 August 2021. « Xi Jinping's assault on tech will change China's trajectory. »

[5] Morozov, Evgeny. 2011. *The Net Delusion. How Not to Liberate the World*. Penguin Books: London.

[6] See https://www.brookings.edu/articles/seven-major-changes-in-chinas-finalized-personal-information-protection-law/ for a translation of the law and some comments.

- How are platform technologies used in China (different from democratic countries)?
- What is the role of the state, as compared to private firms, in using these technologies?
- Specifically, we aim to better understand the following two aspects:
    1. Regulation of private online platforms (and their technologies) by the state: who/which governmental authorities set which regulation? Who monitors enforcement? What are the major rules and what is the overarching idea/justification behind the regulation? What is the role of "super apps" (and the companies controlling them)?
    2. Use of platform technologies by governmental agencies: How do public agencies and state-owned enterprises make use of platform technologies in order to support monitoring of citizens and coercion of law enforcement, e.g. in the realm of facial recognition technologies? Who combines and controls lots of diverse data sources collecting real-time information about many individuals? What is the role (and the state) of the Social Credit System?
- Are these developments mainly relevant for Chinese citizens or also for other countries, especially the EU? Why? What are the positive aspects (e.g. the aspired reduction of addictive gaming, facilitated by the exploitation of big data about individual citizens) and what are the negative aspects (e.g. the partial exclusion from social life of citizens with low social credit ratings)? (What) should we in Europe fear?[7]
- How is regulation of technology companies used differently in autocratic states, as compared to democratic states, to foster their social goals? For instance, how are privacy laws linked towards some form of a constitution, like the reference to dignity in Europe? What are the checks and balances with respect to the data processed for specific products such as an app?

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[7] Tirole (2021) paints a very frightening picture of "(social) science fiction" based on high-tech social rankings of individuals. How realistic is this (in the short term)? See Tirole, Jean. 2021. "Digital Dystopia", *American Economic Review*, 111(6): 2007–2048.