

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Japan's Gradual Move to Address Technological Challenges to Democracy

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Digital Technology: A Double-Edged Sword to Democracy

Digital technology was once hailed for its liberating function, setting people free from the authoritarian rule.¹ The Arab Spring, a series of protest movements against authoritarian governments in Arab countries during the early 2010s, revealed people's reliance on social media and reinforced the belief that new technology could aid democracy. However, authoritarian governments soon began taking advantage of digital technology to strengthen their oppressive rule. Now, social media is also widely believed to contribute to the global spread of populism.

Dual functions of digital technology are not only changing domestic politics but are also increasingly influencing international relations. International relations used to be essentially based on the concept of state sovereignty, in which states are the main actors. However, with the development of digital technology, the face of international relations has become more complex. This is because of the citizen empowerment. The ease with which information can be gathered and disseminated online has enabled individuals to take actions that affect international relations. Open-source intelligence groups such as Bellingcat, which bring together people from diverse backgrounds, can now take on the role of investigative journalism, thereby strengthening the checks on governments that lack transparency. Meanwhile, Social Networking Services (SNS) make it easier to mobilize like-minded individuals, stage protests, and raise calls for freedom. Like the citizen journalists in Myanmar after the coup, people can now use their anonymity to communicate the truth, even when press freedom has been cut off nationally.

On the other hand, the flood of information online has made it difficult for the audience to discern the truth. Authoritarian actors have been spreading disinformation and propaganda to destabilize and polarize democratic societies. Exposure of personal information not only violates privacy, but it is also used for repression. To increase individual surveillance, authoritarian actors and their collaborators have installed backdoors in 5G networks and keystroke-tracking features in social media. Coupled with China's export of surveillance technologies and methods, the accumulation of

¹ Larry Diamond. 2010. "Liberation Technology." *Journal of Democracy*, 21, 3: 69-83.

personal data has been used to deprive individuals of their freedoms. Disinformation is also used to legitimize an illegal war waged by an aggressor state, as seen in the case of the Russian disinformation offensive in the war against Ukraine. Extracted personal data by big tech companies provide foreign agents the cyber weapons of micro-targeting and astroturfing.

Accordingly, there has been a strong call to establish international rules and principles to prevent digital technology from undermining private data and democracy. European Union moved first to regulate the ways to use, process, and store personal data by adopting the General Data Protection Regulation that became effective in 2018.

Japan's Recent Move for Private Data Protection and Disinformation Regulation

To protect people's rights from AI surveillance, it is essential to formulate international rules on data access and privacy. To date, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has established rules for cross-border transactions. However, the WTO regulates international trade only on the basis of whether what is transferred is a physical good or a service, and on the geographical origin of the transferred goods **or** services. Regulations based on these pillars are not conducive to data regulation. There is an urgent need for international rules set by democracies willing to protect people's freedom and privacy.

Under the absence of digital regulations governing the global community, Japan sees the G7 as a useful framework to explore such rules. In 2019, then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe proposed the concept of Data Free Flow with Trust (DFFT), and after repeated discussions at the G7, an action plan was formulated in 2022 within the G7 framework. This action plan encourages cooperation and knowledge sharing among nations on regulations,² and further progress is expected at the G7 meeting in May 2023.

Japan, like other Western countries, has also effectively banned Huawei from its 5G wireless telecommunications network to prohibit technology that may have backdoors installed. However, this is not a governmental regulation but rather an autonomous decision made by major cellphone companies (Softbank, NTT Docomo, and KDDI) to refrain from utilizing Chinese equipment.

The Japanese government has belatedly joined the Export Controls and Human Rights Initiative because AI surveillance technologies, such as surveillance cameras and facial recognition, are being used to suppress human rights in East Turkestan and other parts of the world. The Initiative was launched by Australia, Denmark, Norway, and the United States at the first Summit for Democracy in December 2021. Japan decided to join the initiative in conjunction with the Second Summit for Democracy, bringing the number of participating countries to 25, including Japan and South Korea.³ The goal is to prevent surveillance technology from being transferred to authoritarian countries, such as China and Russia.

² G7 Germany. 2022. "G7 Action Plan for Promoting Data Free Flow with Trust." *G7 Digital Ministers' track - Annex 1*

³ Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State. 2023. "Export Controls and Human Rights Initiative Code of Conduct Released at the Summit for Democracy". <https://www.state.gov/export-controls-and-human-rights-initiative-code-of-conduct-released-at-the-summit-for-democracy/>

Disinformation measures have also accelerated since 2022, although they have lagged behind other countries. Behind this is the fact that the disinformation spread by the Russian government to disrupt countries supporting Ukraine has also flooded Japan, and has had no small impact on the Japanese discursive space.⁴

On April 1, 2022, the Ministry of Defense created the position of Global Strategic Intelligence Officer, whose primary mission is to analyze disinformation, and expanded its cyber unit.⁵ The National Security Strategy, developed in December 2022, called for increased efforts to counter disinformation.⁶ A decision was made to increase the number of cyber personnel to 4,000 by 2027.⁷ In April 2023, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced their joint efforts to counter disinformation, with a focus on analyzing and disseminating accurate information to the public under the Cabinet Secretariat. The Cabinet Intelligence and Research Office will be in charge of analyzing disinformation, and the International Public Relations Office of the Prime Minister's Office will be responsible for disseminating accurate information, promoting a comprehensive countermeasure to disinformation.⁸

Private sector initiatives are also progressing in tandem. Based on recommendations previously compiled by the Study Group on Platform Services established by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the Safer Internet Association established the Japan Fact-check Center in October 2022.⁹ Although Japanese media have had their own fact-checking functions in the past, this is the first organization in Japan dedicated to carrying out fact-checking.

The Need to Create Proactive Narratives

How to adapt digital technology to democracy is expected to be discussed at the G7 Hiroshima Summit in May 2023. In the meantime, there are some initiatives that both governments and the private sector should pursue, such as developing counter-narratives.

Disinformation strategically planned and spread by authoritarian actors seeks to manipulate public opinion by distorting the truth. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Maria Ressa reveals how the Duterte regime has used social media to attack investigative journalism and free media that were critical of its wrongdoings.¹⁰ In a politically divided society, fake news contribute to polarizing people to two camps of “us versus them.” Misused social media is undermining the functioning of democracy. If this trend is not stopped, many democracies of the world could become extremely unstable with mistrust and violence among people.

⁴ Maiko Ichihara. 2022. “Impact of Disinformation on Democracy in Asia”.

<https://www.brookings.edu/research/impact-of-disinformation-on-democracy-in-asia/>

⁵ <Asahi Shimbun>. 2022. “Roshia shinko, SNS mo senjo haiburiddo sen [Russia invasion, SNS are also battlefields: hybrid warfare]”

⁶ The Cabinet Office. 2022. “National Security Strategy of Japan.”

<https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>

⁷ <Nikkei>. 2023. “自衛隊、サイバー人材4000人に「能動的防衛」へ拡充 [Self-Defense Forces expand to “active defense” to 4,000 cyber personnel]” <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOUA263WN0W2A221C2000000/>

⁸ <Asahi Shimbun>. 2023. “Gijoho, kantei chokuzoku de bunseki he: Shushu wo kyoka shi taigai hasshin [Disinformation to be analyzed under the direct control of the Prime Minister's Office to strengthen collection and dissemination to the outside world].” <https://digital.asahi.com/articles/DA3S15611578.html>

⁹ <Japan Fact-check Center>. 2022. “JFCについて [About JFC].” <https://factcheckcenter.jp/n/n50986dc9216c>

¹⁰ Maria Ressa. 2022. *How to Stand Up a Dictator: The Fight for Our Future*. Harper.

Unfortunately, fact-checking alone is not enough to prevent this. There is an undeniable risk that fact-checking can have a backfire effect, reinforcing the beliefs of the sender. Furthermore, while fact-checking is intended to communicate accurate information, it is often too dry to attract public attention. In the online world of social networking, messages must be integrated to feelings and emotions to reach the receptive public. People tend to be interested in narratives that are emotionally charged. According to Maria Ressa, people are not only interested in negative emotions such as anger, but also in positive emotions such as inspiration.

Therefore, it is necessary to form alternative narratives that can counter disinformation narratives. To do this, it would be wise to identify the specific demographic groups that authoritarian actors target to inject disinformation and propaganda, and to formulate effective counter-narratives appealing to those groups. We must be proactive in building and disseminating inspiring pro-democracy narratives to stabilize our national and international communities.

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