At Radio Free Asia (RFA), our job of keeping local people informed of news and information relevant to their lives has never been more challenging. Authoritarians understand very well the threat that the free flow of information presents to their control of citizens and have added innovative online tactics to their methods of intimidation, manipulation, and censorship. Monitoring, surveillance, interception, manipulation, sock puppets, and other bots are being developed and deployed. The criminalization of free speech threatens journalists. The subjects of our reports and our sources are digitally tracked, punished, harassed, and jailed. Sophisticated voice recognition software is allowing governments to target anyone who talks to a journalist, even their own family members.

At the same time, technological innovation has allowed unprecedented levels of civilian participation in the creation of public history and collective accountability with the advent of the modern nation-state in post-World War II Asia. These new platforms for participation have increasingly democratized the public sphere and, in their initial emergence, allowed largely unfettered commentary by the public on their governments, civil institutions, and social norms—places where the masses had previously been kept voiceless. Rapid technological advancement has allowed a global level of coordination and information flow that has exposed state surveillance, disregard for civil rights, and outright violence by governments against citizens. With new tools of engagement and the expansion of internet freedom technology, this globalizing civil society began to redefine ideas around freedom of expression, political ideology, and day-to-day social norms.

This issue of the *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* examines the impact modern engagement technologies have had on civil society in both closed and open societies. The original optimism that digital technology and commerce would play a liberalizing role in authoritarian countries has dwindled as regimes misappropriated the open societal vision of a worldwide web to expand information controls. Authoritarians and other censorship advocates have readily adapted, re-tooled, and re-established their approaches to information control in the 21st century. But in what has become a dynamic cat-and-mouse game of circumvention and censorship, journalists, civil institutions, and human rights...
activists have consistently managed to stay ahead and maintain their role in promoting public discourse on taboo issues including minority rights, freedom of speech, and a global democratic outlook.

Under constant surveillance and threat of retaliation, civil society has created a platform for new ideas about human rights focused on individual freedoms, consent, and bodily autonomy. Across Asia, these institutions have given individuals a broad field of political, social, and economic discourse by advancing technologies that allow greater access and engagement. While conversations about the role of the state and civil institutions have always existed in these societies, technological innovation has fueled a universal understanding of individual autonomy and community-based governance that transcends into political organizing on the ground. Public history has been redefined in the eyes of citizens to include otherwise erased stories like those of LGBTQ+ citizens in South Asia, the Rohingya population in Myanmar, and civil society in Vietnam.

In response, governments have set up uniquely complex systems in order to regulate content inside and outside their borders. Some democratic governments have navigated new technological platforms trying to focus on individual expression and transparency of sourcing, sometimes with major obstacles along the way. In India, discrimination against the Dalit caste has been perpetuated on the same platforms that have questioned the caste system at large. As civil institutions seek to broaden ideas of collective national identity and individual cultural identity through technological innovation, so do individual citizens who use those same vibrant platforms to reinforce tradition and target what they see as fundamentally changing societal relationships.

Alternatively, authoritarian regimes have launched an audacious global campaign to use technological innovations in order to suppress dissent domestically, promote politically-motivated narratives globally, and instigate false movements based on fake news. In 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping laid out a clear vision for China’s media and online presence. Since the rapid rise of technological innovation has allowed faster and more comprehensive political expression, the Chinese Communist Party has taken every measure it can to regulate it. Xi declared that “All work of the party’s news and public opinion media must reflect the will of the party, mirror the views of the party…and achieve love of the party.”

The regime’s new vision challenges established human rights-based norms with global institutions working alongside civil society actors, and invokes the same rights to freedom of expression in order to advance authoritarian narratives. Authoritarian governments have always been at odds with the values and very existence of an independent, open, and critical civil society. Through coercion and violence, authoritarians consistently try to shape civil institutions to fit their geopolitical vision.

In Asia, these new technologies began as tools of empowerment through information. For a few years, that tide of freedom of expression and access seemed unstoppable. President Bill Clinton famously compared China’s attempts to regulate internet content to “trying
to nail Jell-O to the wall” as many believed that technological advances were going to naturally offset those restrictions. The internet was seen as flexible and too inherently based in freedom of expression to restrict and consistently censor.

That perception has since shifted, and several articles in this edition explore how the relationship between states and civil society institutions in Asia is much more nuanced. Across varying degrees of openness in Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang, and other authoritarian regions, governments, civil society institutions, and everyday citizens are engaging in back-and-forth efforts to shape online spaces. These engagements form the core network that shapes the conversations around minority rights, individual freedoms, and consent in Asia. In each region, activists relied on a reinvigorated sense of universal justice supported by a larger network of global civil institutions.

The Chinese Communist Party has sought to undermine civil society leaders in Hong Kong by targeting their reputation and narrowing the field of “acceptable” speech through legislation and policing. Hong Kong is culturally and economically tied to both mainland China and the West. Its citizens have vicariously experienced both cultures through the lens of new media platforms that have empowered civil rights movements and created competing visions of an integrated or independent Hong Kong.

Nonetheless, online interactions are increasingly monitored and sometimes self-censored for fear of official or social consequences. With increasing restrictions, technological innovations that allow secure communications and anonymous public forums with diverse political expression have brought citizens of Hong Kong in a sphere engaging in nuanced debate over their political futures. As democratic movements in the city are consistently stifled by pro-Beijing elements, global civil society in democratic countries has connected with those movements. Bilateral engagements existed before, but their frequency, volume, and speed are newly-spurred phenomena shaping public history and the perception of Hong Kong’s role in the world.

Hong Kong’s relationship with the U.S. is defined by a continued Congressional commitment to the city’s core freedoms. Jeffrey Ngo and Nathan Law explore the effects of political commitments by the U.S. to Hong Kong’s autonomy and its influence on business leaders benefiting from Hong Kong’s global trade status. The technological innovations that gave rise to an interconnected civil society also brought substantial market growth that is harder to maintain with strict censorship regulations. But by using these same innovations to create controlled online spaces, China and other authoritarian regimes in Asia have been able to selectively nurture economic growth while actively restricting mass organizing and online criticism.

In Tibet, traditional civil society institutions are restricted as part of the Chinese Communist Party’s effort to restrict expressions of Tibetan identity. Buer Su’s article identifies at length how Tibetan youth use hip-hop in both physical and online spaces to reclaim discourse around their own identity and engage in those complexities with Tibetan and external audiences. Through hip-hop, Tibetan youth have found a
technologically-empowered outlet harder to regulate through traditional censorship mechanisms, and they have effectively connected it to their messaging around Tibetan identity, representation, and human rights.

The Chinese government has employed the same tools used by Tibetans to propagate its own image of Tibetan tradition and society and, as Su argues, “showcases Tibetan culture only to bolster its claim that China is a multiethnic country.” While online platforms can provide a space for freedom of expression for Tibetans, the Chinese government has utilized these same spaces to commodify and exotify Tibetans for its own benefit. This weaponization of technology allows the Chinese government to control narratives about Tibetans and demonize connections between civil society groups and the West.

China’s weaponization of information technology does not stop at controlling narratives. Through some recent in-depth coverage, Radio Free Asia’s Uyghur Service has exposed the drastic security measures, as well as the conditions, scale, and scope of repression faced by the Uyghur and other Muslim minorities living in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The Chinese Communist Party has embarked on an expansive surveillance campaign to control and dominate the region. Under the leadership and policies of Chen Quanguo, the party secretary in charge of the region, Beijing has effectively jailed over a million Uyghurs, and violated basic human rights of the entire minority population.

At Radio Free Asia, our Uyghur service reporters have been targeted, harassed, and had their China-based family members detained as retaliation for their break-through reporting on the dramatic escalation of repression, mass incarceration, and implementation of a high-tech surveillance state in Xinjiang. China is utilizing technological innovations with deadly consequences for activists and critics.

Across borders, individuals who participate in civil society discourses around individual, social, or economic rights are threatened by pushback from authoritarian regimes and opposing interests. Through a complex apparatus of soft power that creates alternative narratives and sharp power that directly threatens those who fall outside of official talking points, authoritarian regimes have utilized technological innovations to target the increased globalization of civil society. While they recognize the economic benefits of globalization, authoritarians have effectively navigated those technologies in a way that largely restricts freedoms of their citizens while still allowing them to reap economic reward.

On the other hand, while authoritarian restrictions on information technology have prevented civil society groups from organizing, lack of infrastructure and access to technology has created the same problem in countries like India. Although India is a democracy with enshrined individual freedoms in its constitution, its experience with rapidly developing online movements has still met significant obstacles. Shareen Joshi’s examination of India’s recent #MeToo movement shows that progress remains stunted by the country’s limited information infrastructure. Through social media, women across
India have been able to address long-standing harassment and assault, and quickly narrate their experiences to mass audiences. But by defining the movement’s core on online platforms, Joshi finds that mostly wealthy, urban women have benefitted from the #MeToo movement, leaving behind poorer, rural populations. India’s #MeToo movement has forced a crucial reevaluation of consent culture and enforcement of sexual harassment laws, but outside of proper context, these platforms have perpetuated class and urban/rural divides between Indian women.

International civil society must consider access to technology as a central pillar of their advocacy platforms. Access has been at the forefront of our work at the Open Technology Fund, where we empower users and innovators who want to promote accessible, secure, and socially-conscious communication technologies. By tracking censorship on websites and mobile apps, we have been able to provide tools to help citizens circumvent the ways in which authoritarian governments in Beijing, Hanoi, and other countries curate particular political views and remove threatening ideas from various conversations online.

Journalists provide the bedrock of freedom of expression across the world, and Asia has been increasingly dangerous for their work in the past few years. The projects of censorship by governments have come at the cost of the lives of those reporting on them. So far, 2019 has been one of the most dangerous years for journalists across the world. Reporters Without Borders found that “the number of countries regarded as safe, where journalists can work in complete security, continues to decline, while authoritarian regimes continue to tighten their grip on the media.”

The glimmer of hope comes from two sources: audiences who continue to yearn for truth, and the subsequent fear — as exemplified in the dramatic steps taken to control information — sparked in the hearts of dictators and despots. Even as unbiased, uncensored journalism threatens regime control, so too it remains a sought-after commodity for their citizens. We can never forget that at the heart of this struggle is something basic. People living under repressive regimes or in places where information-flow is controlled still want to know, to understand, and even have an inkling of what is actually happening in their cities, neighborhoods, and countries. When given a choice, people will not let state-controlled media have the last word. My organization exists because people in RFA’s target countries find ways to access and spread our news because it is a rare, and often the only, lifeline to the truth.

While audiences largely know how to seek out answers on their own, all who safeguard and propel journalists must shoulder the responsibility of finding ways to thwart disinformation and provide access to uncensored media. In order to continue the global narrative on universal human rights, we must be able to continue operating, securely following up on sensitive leads, investigating stories, and sharing information with audiences that need it. Although technological innovations have provided an effective mechanism for both advancing freedoms and quelling them, technology also enables repressed citizens to exercise their rights in the global online community.
Libby Liu became the President of Radio Free Asia in 2005 and transformed the organization from a radio broadcaster into a digital multi-media interactive news organization. She is an advocate for global internet freedom and her organization has led the fight against media censorship and internet firewalls in Asia through the Open Technology Fund.

With contributions from Nawar Nemeh, Policy Consultant at Radio Free Asia