

UN75 Dialogues at NCH

Impact of Digital Technologies

Faculty of Politics and International Relations

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### Report

The fourth UN75 Dialogue at NCH was hosted by Dr Xuechen Chen (NCH) and Dr Carwyn Morris (LSE, Manchester).

Dr Carwyn Morris offered an insightful account of the expanding significance of the digital technologies, the increasing contestation of the digital space, the uneven distribution of power and capabilities in this space and the significance of digital sovereignty in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Carwyn talked about the significance of technology in controlling everyday life, with focus on China. Through this case study, Carwyn has further researched digital activism, political contestation, on-line and spatial governability and practices of resistance. As the Covid-19 pandemic spread and intensified through 2020, Carwyn considered how governmental responses are interpreted by individuals and eventually gain their support, even if they involve enhanced surveillance. His key point was that technologies that can be used for surveillance can be imagined in multiple ways. When thought of positively, such technologies are rarely understood in terms of surveillance—they become technologies of surveillance only when imagined negatively. To think through overt surveillance as a desired practice of governance, it is helpful to consider it as an overt form of ‘biopolitical’ governance. It was noted that China is not exceptional. Overt biopolitical governance is occurring simultaneously around the world. Reflected through social media, the question of biopolitical governance is simply reduced to people’s lived experiences. Under specific conditions (e.g. pandemic) overt surveillance can become desired rather than feared. This was seen not only in the case of democratic regimes of the Western European/North Atlantic space but also within China itself (Wuhan-based doctor Li Wenliang). Except in the latter, government censorship turned surveillance into a part of overt biopolitics which was causing harm.

The dialogue then turned on the broader implications of the myriad of uses of technology. The over-arching question about technology and sovereignty was raised. What will happen to more traditional forms of power rivalries with technology gaining prominence of place both in people’s

everyday lives and by extension, in the image of leadership, states and international relations (to link this with a hitherto dominant neo-realist representation of the international space). To cite from an ECFR paper (July 2020):

- Covid-19 has revealed the critical importance of technology for economic and health resilience, making Europe's digital transformation and sovereignty a question of existential importance.
- Rising US-China tensions are an additional incentive for Europe to develop its own digital capabilities; it risks becoming a battleground in their struggle for tech and industrial supremacy.
- Democratic governments – keen to preserve an open market in digital services while protecting the interests of citizens – find the European model an increasingly attractive alternative to the US and Chinese approaches.
- The EU cannot continue to rely on its regulatory power but must become a tech superpower in its own right. Referees do not win the game.
- Europe missed the first wave of technology but must take advantage of the next, in which it has competitive advantages such as in edge computing.
- EU member states lack a common position on tech issues or even a shared understanding of the strategic importance of digital technologies, such as on broadband rollout or application of AI.

These observations gave rise to a lively debate about superpower in the digital age, the supremacy of the US in controlling digital sovereignty and China's concerted efforts at clawing back from this influence through a series of expansions and challenges, which all form part of the US-China rivalry (though for the lay reader, this mostly appears to center on trade disputes, whilst in fact it has huge security implications).

The dialogue concluded by noting that the lived experiences of people in 2020 and beyond will be a central battleground for control and influence amongst current and rising powers, whilst specific events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, can accelerate rivalries rapidly and shift capabilities drastically with long-lasting consequences for governance and order.