Freedom On The Net 2018

Fake news, data collection, and the challenge to democracy

Governments around the world are tightening control over citizens' data and using claims of "fake news" to suppress dissent, eroding trust in the internet as well as the foundations of democracy, according to *Freedom on the Net 2018*.

At the same time, the regime in China has become more brazen in providing like-minded governments with technology and training that enable them to control their own citizens.

"Democracies are struggling in the digital age, while China is exporting its model of censorship and surveillance to control information both inside and outside its borders," said Michael J. Abramowitz, president of Freedom House.

These trends led global internet freedom to decline for the eighth consecutive year in 2018.

"This year has proved that the internet can be used to disrupt democracies as surely as it can destabilize dictatorships," said Adrian Shahbaz, Freedom House's research director for technology and democracy. "Online propaganda and disinformation have increasingly poisoned the digital sphere, while the unbridled collection of personal data is breaking down traditional notions of privacy."

Key findings from Freedom on the Net 2018:

– Declines outnumber gains for the eighth consecutive year. Out of the 65 countries assessed in Freedom on the Net, 26 experienced a deterioration in internet freedom. Almost half of all declines were related to elections.

– China trains the world in digital authoritarianism: Chinese officials held trainings and seminars on new media or information management with

representatives from 36 out of the 65 countries assessed by Freedom on the Net.

– Internet freedom declined in the United States.

– Citing fake news, governments curbed online dissent: At least 17 countries approved or proposed laws that would restrict online media in the name of fighting "fake news" and online manipulation.

– Authorities demand control over personal data: Governments in 18 countries increased surveillance, often eschewing independent oversight and weakening encryption in order to gain unfettered access to data.

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