

**Division of International Relations**

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**The Political Effect of Cyber-MNCs with Knowledge Power on the Authority of Sovereign States in the International System**

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1. Overview of research problem

Recent decades have witnessed an intensification in the globalization process and a correlative strengthening in the power of multinational corporations at the expense of sovereign state power. The ascendancy of the Internet and cyberspace in the last decade has a­­­­­­­lso led to the development of new multinational corporations (MNCs) in cyberspace. Today, the world’s five largest companies by market capitalization are cyber-MNCs (Taplin 2017).

The rising power of cyber-MNCs has been perceived as both an opportunity and a threat by liberal states. On one hand, liberal optimists have seen these corporations as part of the liberalizing effects of the Internet: tools for empowering citizens, enabling economic opportunities, increasing freedom of expression, and spreading liberal ideas (Diamond 2010). Furthermore, social media networks have been credited with shifting power from authoritarian regimes to ordinary people seeking freedom and social justice (Shehabat 2015). On the other hand, the vast amount of information that cyber-MNCs accumulate and their ability to influence agendas and perceptions have given them huge knowledge power beyond that of traditional MNCs. This power, used actively by cyber-MNCs themselves or exploited by others, has eroded the power of states and has fostered political change in ways traditional MNCs never have. This presents challenges to states from within and without.

Sovereign states today need to address issues such as populism, increased interethnic tensions, a revival of nationalism, the intensification of political conflict, and domestic polarization. Cyber-MNCs have some bearing on these issues. For example, researchers have identified a close correlation between social media owned by cyber-MNCs and populism. Social media provides an ideal platform for “the populist to appeal to ordinary people against a liberal establishment” (Gerbaudo 2018; Postill 2018; Engesser et al. 2017).

The effect cyber-MNCs have across states is not uniform. The magnitude of their impact can vary in liberal states, with the rise of populism in Brazil, for example, producing different consequences than it has in the United Kingdom. They can even have contrasting effects in authoritarian states, with Russia, for example, having acquired power while Egypt has undergone revolution.

The study will outline a new approach to explaining the variations in the effects cyber-MNCs have on states, working with a four-fold classification model identified in the terms polarized, intensified, radicalized, and destabilized. The study will relate concepts from comparative politics with those from the field of international relations, in order the explain the phenomenon.

1. Research questions

The study will focus on the following related questions: What differential effects have cyber-MNCs had on liberal and authoritarian states and which factors best explain that variation in states’ vulnerability to their political influence?

The study will offer a new model for the differential political influence cyber-MNCs have on four distinctive types of regime and of state capacities as independent variables. As such, it will examine the following combined formations: weak liberal states, strong liberal states, weak authoritarian states, and strong authoritarian states. Case studies related to each variant will provide a basis to analytically account for the variations in the political effects cyber-MNCs have on states. This approach of interrelating regimes and state capacities to the political impact cyber-MNCs have represents an innovative approach not observed in the known literature.

The study will make a contribution to knowledge by providing the following:

* Demonstrating that the differential impact cyber-MNCs have on state power (as suggested in general by Nye, for example) is related to both the particular state in question’s capacity and its political regime and can also encompass international and domestic politics alike.
* Providing new explanations for the weakening of the liberal order in the last decade and the return of revisionist powers.
* Explaining the new, sometimes crucial effect of Internet technology, represented in the study by cyber-MNCs, on the diffusion and erosion of states’ powers.

1. Literature review

The literature review will contextualize the research terminology used in the study, beginning with the relation between power and technology. As the study addresses cyber-MNCs, their special attributes will be outlined and combined with the discussion of power and cyber-MNCs in order to understand the diffusion of state’s power by such MNCs. We will conclude the literature review by examining political regimes and states’ capacities: the two independent variables responsible for the differential effect on the political power of states.

One can often conceive of state power in outmoded ways as simply hard power, “the ability to get others to do what they otherwise wouldn’t do” (Dahl and Douglas 2005). This disregards soft power, a term coined by Nye (1990) for the ability to set agendas which determine how others see issues (Bachrach and Baratz 1963, 632-642) and the ability to affect minds so that there will ultimately be no need to twist arms (Lukes 2009). Hard power usually relates to tangible resources such as military capacities and finance, while soft power encompasses intangibles such as institutions, ideas, values, culture, and the perceived legitimacy of policies (Nye 2012, 21).

Most International Relations theories of power were developed in the context of the classic industrial age. Morgenthau (1978, 322) claims that power- or security-seeking states gain relative advantage by the development of more efficient production methods (economic power) and/or advanced combat capability (military power). Information and communications technology has changed some of these perceptions of power. Internet technology was initially conceived and developed in the United States and came to represent Washington’s liberal norms and values in the early 1990s and its desire to project US soft power (Carr 2016, 184-185; McCarthy 2015, 74-100). Members of the Clinton administration promoted the open and anonymous environment the Internet provided, believing it would undermine authoritarianism and oppression and promote liberal ideas (Miller 2018). However, as Carr states, “Internet technology is not discriminating – It can be used to enhance or undermine state power…the Internet is neither democratizing nor repressive...it is an expression of the interests and values of those who engage with it” (2016, 182-190).

A second aspect of power is its structural (as distinct from relational) aspect. Haviland defines structural power as “power that organizes and orchestrates the systemic interaction within and among societies, directing economic and political forces on the one hand and ideological forces that shape public ideas, values, and beliefs on the other” (in Haviland et al. 2017, 657). Strange identifies four major kinds of power structure in the international political economy related to production, finance, security, and knowledge respectively (1988, 45-133; May 1996, 167-189). The study will principally focus on the knowledge power structurecategorythat addresses the channels through which beliefs, ideas, and knowledge are communicated or delimited. Power in the knowledge structure conception lies as much in the capacity to deny as in to convey knowledge (Strange 1988; Stopford, Henley, and Strange 2002; Schwab 2017).

The basic definition of an MNC is a company that has its headquarters in one home country and operates in at least another in a host country (Wilkins 1991, 53). These profit-seeking organizations aim to expand sales, acquire resources, diversify markets and supply sources, while minimizing competitive risk (Caves 2007; Porter 1991; Dupont 2003).

Today, reflecting the globalization process, there are over 100,000 MNCs with over 860,000 foreign affiliates around the world (UNCTAD, 2017). Scholars debate the impact MNCs have had on their host countries, mainly in developing nations (Hymer and Cohen 1979) and the relationship of MNCs to their national origins (Ōmae 2002; Doremus 1999; Gilpin 2009). These issues are even more complex with cyber-MNCs that have no necessary requirement for physical infrastructures in host countries (Doz, Santos, and Williamson 2007).

Cyber-MNCs gain through the use of the electronically interconnected information resources of the cyber-domain (Kuehl 2009). Cyber-MNCs can be divided into two types: the mixed or purely digital players (search engine, social network, cloud solution, e-commerce provider, digital content provider) and the information and communication technology (ICT) players that provide the infrastructure for Internet access. The number of cyber-digital companies among the top 100 MNCs more than doubled between 2010 and 2015 (UNCTAD 2017).

Many US cyber-MNCs profess to liberal ideas, such as replacing the “old” social infrastructure forms “which oppose the flow of knowledge, trade, and immigration” to a new global community and the “game-changing” implications of the Internet on politics (Zuckerberg 2017a; Zuckerberg 2017b; Schmidt and Cohen 2010). These ideas originate in Barlow’s “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” (Barlow 1996) popular at the time the major cyber-MNCs were established in Silicon Valley.

The study will deploy the terms diffusion and erosion of state power interchangeably as it is principally concerned with the nature of power depleted from the state and not the actor making the correlative gain.

Erosion in the power of states is not a new phenomenon. Globalization has eroded key aspects of sovereignty in several major states in the last three decades: for example, currency sovereignty in European Union states (Krasner 2001). While these decisions were made by the states themselves, the rise of MNCs threatens other aspects of nation-state power, both domestically and internationally (Kehone and Nye 1989; Castelles 2000).

MNCs challenge state sovereignty at several levels (Strange 1996). Globalization is creating interdependency between nation states and MNCs. This weakens the will and sense of legitimacy in states to use their military, economic and political power to protect their rights. Vernon (1971) argues most states lack the economic and technological capacity to free themselves from dependency upon MNCs. MNCs may also impinge upon a state’s cultural and legal sovereignty (Koskal 2006). Castells (2005) contends that people questioning the legitimacy of government or the identity of any particular society could lead to the destabilization of the state.

Some scholars argue that the transfer of power from sovereign states to MNCs is limited. Gilpin (1993) recognizes that MNCs have undermined the significance of national boundaries but contends they have not yet replaced the nation-state as a primary actor in international politics. Other scholars argue that there is no clear evidence that nation states have lost power to MNCs (Strange 1993; Nye 2010).

Cyber-MNCs mainly from the United States, such as Facebook, Amazon, Google, and Apple, have gained knowledge power in recent years derived from the vast data they collect and marshal (Foer 2017; Galloway 2017). These elements of power have helped the cyber-MNCs’ businesses, but they may also have eroded the power of sovereign states in new ways beyond those presented by traditional MNCs.

The effect of cyber-MNCs has been researched but not in a comprehensive way, rather in discrete analyses in various case studies over the last decade. Social media networks, for example, have been described as “a mobilizing force” in order to “topple an entrenched regime if everybody would come together” (Castells 2012, 81). They have been identified as elements in the 2009 civil revolt in Moldova dubbed “the first Facebook revolution” (Zuckerman 2011), the 2009 unrest in Iran dubbed “the first Twitter revolution” (Sullivan 2009), and the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt. Cyber-MNCs have also played a role in elections in democratic states: examples include the 2016 US presidential election, the background to the Five Star Movement’s role in recent Italian elections, the participation of the Pirate Party in Iceland’s polls, and the phenomenon of the Philippines “keyboard army.” Persily (2017) argues that such elections demonstrate a disintegration of power in established institutions and that “the void was filled by an unmediated populist nationalism tailor-made for the Internet age.”

At this point it would be helpful to clarify the difference between **regimes** and **states**. Regimes constitute a configuration of control over the state, but regimes may come and go while states are more enduring (Fishman 1990, 428).

A liberal-democratic regime adopts associated liberal principles, policies, and methods and adopts a liberal attitude towards citizen rights and privileges, granting them to all equitably. It does not view them as a threat to the existence and functioning of the state. A liberal-democratic regime acknowledges a diversity of groups within society and maintains a neutrality relative to them. Assumption of political power is achieved by constitutional, legal, and democratic means.

An authoritarian regime is characterized by strong central government that permits people only a limited degree of political freedom, with the political process and all individual freedoms government-managed without any interceding constitutional accountability (Longley 2018). Linz (2009) outlines the four most salient characteristics of an authoritarian regime: limited political freedom with strict government controls on political institutions; a controlling regime that justifies itself to the people as a necessary evil; strict government-imposed constraint on political opponents and anti-regime activity; a ruling executive with vague, loosely defined, and shifting powers.

**State capacity** has been described as the ability of state institutions to effectively implement official goals (Sikkink 2012) and to deliver key political results (Rotberg 2003). Fukuyama (2004) distinguishes between government policy choices and the extent to which a state has the power to plan and execute policies.

Berwich and Christia (2018) identify three activities the state develops capacities for: the ability to secure resources (“extraction”); the capacity and efficiency of administration to coordinate collective action (“coordination”); and interaction between higher levels of the state and lower level agents (“compliance”). Others define the dimensions of state capacities in different ways: for example, the extractive capacity as owning the wherewithal to reach populations, collect and manage information, possess trustworthy agents to manage the revenue, and ensure popular compliance with tax policy; the coercive as the state’s ability to preserve its borders, protect against external threats, maintain internal order, and enforce policy; and the administrative as the ability to develop policy and to produce and deliver public goods and services (Hanson and Sigman 2013; Skocpol 1985). Rotberg (2003), on the other hand, highlights coercive capacity and provision of human security as the most important political goods, with the delivery of others possible only when a reasonable measure of security has been sustained over time. This point is echoed by Tellis (2000) who considers “coercive arms the ultimate measure of power.”

**Nation-states** may be categorized into strong, weak, or failed. **Strong states** perform well delivering all kinds of political goods mainly due to their ability to near-monopolize the means of violence within their territory and to possess an effective set of institutions. **Weak states** lack the effective political institutions and resources to implement their policies, protect their populations from violent conflict, and obtain political goods (Miller 2017; Rice and Patrick 2008). The worse weak states perform in delivering the various political goods, the weaker they become.

Measuring state capacity is a challenge to researchers. Different research projects have deployed different indicators to measure state capacity along with content analysis, qualitative review, and quantitative data in varying combinations in order to obtain a measure of a state’s capacity. Hendrix (2010), for example, uses 15 different indicators to assess state capacity, while Hanson and Sigman (2013) use 24.

1. Gaps in existing literature

The extant literature describes the effect of cyber-MNCs on other players in a uniform way that does not distinguish between the differential political variables states present due to variations in state capacity and political regime. Contemporary research analyzes the various effects MNCs have on international relations through certain prisms (related to rising populism, growing ethnic tensions, reviving nationalism, intensification of political conflicts, domestic polarization, revolutions, and so on). It identifies causes for each phenomenon without suggesting a more comprehensive approach beyond that may be applied to future case studies.

5. Theoretical explanations and research hypotheses

The study will theorize that US cyber-MNCs with knowledge power acquired through data collection or processing have a significant political impact on states, the extent of which depends on the particular state's capacity and political regime. In other words, its hypothesis is that variations in state capacity and political regime produce different political effects in states from cyber-MNCs.

The table below identifies four main types of political effect cyber-MNCs can have on states. Each relies on a different interrelation of state capacity and political regime. Examples are given for each type.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Liberal Regime** | **Authoritarian Regime** |
| **Strong States** | **Polarized**  Erosion of hard and soft power which weakens domestic authority, deepens polarization, and fosters the rise of populism.  United States 2016 presidential election, United Kingdom (Brexit) | **Intensified**  Enhancement of hard, soft, and sharp power in the international order  China (soft power), Russia (foreign election intervention) |
| **Weak States** | **Radicalized**  Erosion of hard power which weakens the state and potentially causes a regime change into illiberal or authoritarian forms  The rise of populist leaders in Brazil, Mexico | **Destabilized**  Erosion of hard power which weakens the state and potentially causes regime instability, revolution, even deterioration into a failed state  Egypt, Yemen (Arab Spring), Myanmar |

The table points to strong liberal states such as the United States and the United Kingdom undergoing erosion of both hard and soft power over the last five years. Such power erosion makes them more vulnerable to outside intervention, deepens internal polarization, and fosters the rise of populism, though without the full regime change that may take place in certain weak liberal states.

Cyber-MNCs possess increasing volumes of knowledge power. Facebook and Google conduct deep and comprehensive analysis of their data about their users and their environment (Jones 2016; Murphy 2016; Foer 2017; Galloway 2017). This knowledge power possessed by cyber MNCs helps them micro-target their consumers in a way that makes them attractive to advertisers. Such knowledge power has also allegedly been used by Cambridge Analytica, however, to reshape popular perceptions around the 2016 US elections and the UK’s EU membership referendum (Kornbluh 2018; Grassegger and Krogerus 2017). There is evidence of the successful use of social media to affect the Brexit referendum, given that advocates of leaving the EU were seven times more numerous than their opponents on Twitter and five times more active on Instagram (Polonski 2016).

Cyber-MNCs also play a major role in the contemporary media industry. Free and unbiased media have always been pillars of liberal states, shining a light on government performance via two mechanisms Bailard (2014) calls “mirror-holding” and “window-opening.” In the last few years, Facebook and Google have come to predominate over the vast majority of other media channels (Gottfried and Shearer 2017), something which helps them to reinforce the “bubble” separating people from information contrary to their viewpoints, leaving them with content that only confirms their existing views (Okyle 2016; Pariser 2012). It has furthermore been argued that Facebook has exposed users to angrier and more confrontational material, including fake news, that has, in turn, made people more extreme in their outlooks (Galloway 2017).

Micro-targeting and the “bubble” phenomenon can also aid the anti-democratic influence of authoritarian powers such as China and Russia. These authoritarian states are in the ascendant (Gat 2008; Mead 2014) and aim to replace global democratic norms with authoritarian practices as part of what Miller (2018) calls “the boomerang effect” countering attempts to liberalize the world. Such states use the Internet and cyber-MNCs to exercise their “sharp power,” applying the same principles internationally to their suppression of political pluralism and free expression at home (Walker and Ludwig 2017). They thus prevent a productive discussion from happening in democracies and disseminate fake news that amplifies divisive social and political messages and deepens domestic polarization (Zappone 2017; Spohr 2017). The study will incorporate case studies related to alleged Russian intervention in the electoral process of certain liberal states (Stamos 2017; Issac and Shane 2017; Collins, Poulsen, and Ackerman 2017; Collins 2017; Paul and Matthews 2016). Such Russian intervention has exacerbated ethnic tensions, rekindled nationalism, and intensified political conflict internationally while also weakening public confidence in both journalism and elections (Howard 2018; Swift 2016).

As exemplified in the table above, strong authoritarian states like China and Russia are increasingly gaining power through politically exploiting US cyber-MNCs’ knowledge. In addition to case studies of Russian intervention in foreign elections, the study will examine the exploitation of the Edward Snowden leaks in order to foster a sense of “moral equivalence” with liberal states and attempts to shape a less liberalized, less America-influenced future for the Internet (Segal 2018; Nocetti 2015; Deibert 2009).

China and Russia also seek to combat the influence of US cyber-MNCs over their own citizens. They are building their own sovereign cyber-network separate from the global Internet (digital isolation) and curtailing the operation of US-based MNCs in their countries (Pham 2018; East-West Digital News 2014; Soldatov and Borgoan 2015). They are developing and exploiting mass surveillance tools and strategies in order to retain the power advantage they have over their citizens (Lange 2014). They thus seek to avoid events such as the 2011 Russian “almost-revolution” (Tobin 2014; White and McAllister 2014). These developments help to explain the differences in the impact cyber-MNCs have on these states compared to liberal or weak authoritarian states.

Again as illustrated in the above table, the study will explore weak liberal states such as the new democracies in Latin America. The erosion of their hard power can lead to a drift towards authoritarianism prevailing over a retreating democracy (Smith 2018; Weyland 2013).

One recent study shows people in Latin America to be the most avid social media users in the world (Emarketer 2016). Assuming that fake news communicated via MNC platforms is effective within polarized societies and that polarization is a major characteristic of Latin American politics, this makes these countries susceptible to efforts to promote divisive and anti-liberal narratives via online platforms (Gurganus 2018; Carrique 2018; Fonseca and Green 2018). This may, in turn, give rise to a populist candidate with a tendency to promote an illiberal regime (such as Bolsonaro in Brazil or López Obrador in Mexico). This can further foster radicalization and change toward a national-populist, illiberal, even autocratic regime, especially since the checks and balances in states with only recent democratic history are less effective than in strong liberal states.

As the above table also shows, the study will explore weak authoritarian states affected by cyber-MNCs and the erosion in hard power that may make these states susceptible to frequent regime change or failed state scenarios. Snyman-Ferreira defines internal sovereignty as “the competence and authority to exercise the function of a state within national borders and to regulate internal affairs freely” (2010). Cyber-MNCs may destabilize and damage the internal sovereignty of weak authoritarian states indirectly through providing an alternative communication platform for dissidents. Access to cyber-MNC platforms shifted the balance of power from authoritarian regimes to civil society actors in the first wave of Arab social unrest in 2011 (Campbell 2011; Howard and Hussein 2013; Lotan et al. 2011). It led to regime change in places such as Egypt and Tunisia, but also to failed states in places such as Libya and Yemen. The same platforms may also provoke drives towards ethnic cleansing in states such as Myanmar through the spread of hate speech (Safi 2018).

Weak authoritarian states differ from the strong ones in the fact that, although they are authoritarian in their practice offline, they are unwilling or unable to police online activity and discussion to a similarly restrictive degree. Strong authoritarian states are more politically and economically able to invest in censorship infrastructure, making them less susceptible to social media-leveraged dissent, whereas the Arab Spring states were not able to the (Fung, Gilman, and Shakabatur 2013).

6. Definition of variables

**State regime** (independent variable): As the research is concentrated on the effects of cyber-MNCs, the study will adopt the Freedom on the Net (FOTN) indicator devised by Freedom House (2018) as a tool for regime classification. A state’s FOTN score is based on three factors. The first is the state’s ability to obstruct Internet access, including infrastructural and economic barriers and government blocking of specific applications and technologies. The “great firewall of China” and China’s limitations on Google, Apple, and American hardware companies in exporting to China are examples (Pham 2018). The second is the restriction of Internet content via filtering, blocking, manipulation, and so on. The third is Internet user rights violation such as online activity restrictions, surveillance, privacy violations, and so forth. A recent example here is Russia’s 2014 communications law that prohibits the storage of Russian citizens’ personal data outside Russia and helps the Russian state monitor its citizens (Soldatov and Borgoan 2015). The study will deem states that have an overall ranking of under 30 as having a liberal-democratic regime and those ranking over 60 as an authoritarian one.

**State capacity** (independent variable): This characterizes whether a state is a weak or a strong one by reference to the institutions and resources available to it for governing the polity (Miller 2017,109). The study will use the Fund for Peace’s Fragile States Index (FSI) as a main indicator for classifying a state as either weak or strong. The FSI incorporates twelve indicators related to four principal factors: cohesive, economic, political and social indicators. Using this index is apt as cyber-MNCs may have a significant effect on some of its constituent indicators, such as the level of state security threats, divisions between different social groups, level of confidence in state institutions and processes, protection of human rights, the existence of independent media, and levels of engagement from external actors.

Although it is apparently suitable for defining weak states, it is an insufficient standalone marker for strong states. Russia, China, and the United States, which most research concludes are strong states in the international system, are ranked relatively lowly (109, 89, and 25 respectively) in the FSI. Another popularly-used indicator – per capita GDP – is equally problematic in this regard, with the United States already ranked ninth in 2017, but Russia still ranked seventy-eighth and China ninety-fourth.

In order to have a more comprehensive indicator for strong states, the study will interrelate the FSI with three additional indices related to military capability (coercive capacity), economic strength (extractive capacity), and Internet technology development levels. These were some of the indicators suggested by Tellis (2000) to consitute some of the “building blocks” of national power. For assessing military capability we will use the Global Firepower (GFP) rankings, given that they take into account more than 55 factors in determining any given nation’s score. For economic strength we will use World Bank data regarding Gross National Income (GNI) as it characterizes the economic “engine” of the state involved. Internet technology development, as it relates directly to the effect of cyber-MNCs, will be tracked via the indicator of yearly investment in information and communication technologies (ITU 2018).

**Political effect of cyber-MNCs on states** (dependent variable): Various combinations of the independent variables result in one of the following four distinct results representing the different political effects cyber-MNCs can have on a state:

* Polarized effect: The erosion of the state’s hard and soft power that weakens domestic authority, exacerbates polarization, and supports the rise of populism. This usually results in a partisan political system, a diminution of democratic institutions, a resistance to multilateralism and globalization, among other potential outcomes. The domestic system becomes polarized but the state’s established system of checks and balances and strong democratic tradition preserve its liberal character.
* Intensified effect: This refers to an addition to the hard, soft, and sharp powers of states. Cyber-MNCs become a tool in the exercise of power for these states in their relationship with others.
* Radicalized effect: An erosion of the state’s hard power that can cause regime change in favor of illiberal authoritarianism is meant here. The rise of populism and the diminution of democratic institutions steer the state that lacks sufficient checks and balances and a strong democratic tradition towards a nationalist populism or even an illiberal or authoritarian regime.
* Destabilized effect: This refers to an erosion of the state’s hard power that can cause frequent regime change or even deterioration of the state’s foundations into a failed state scenario. MNCs erode the coercive power of these states and thus make it hard for the government to maintain the state's functioning.

Power erosion will be assessed according to Strange (1996)’s ten powers and responsibilities attributed to the state, Portland’s Soft Power 30 index, and the political change that has taken place in the representative states for each category in the last five years. The study will assess political change in relation to such issues as domestic polarization, the rise of populist voices, ethnic tension, attrition of democratic institutions, anti-migrant and anti-minority sentiments, anti-elitism, resistance to multilateralism and to globalization. We will try to demonstrate a causal relationship arising between the different independent variables and the effect of cyber-MNCs.

7. Methodology

The study will be qualitative in character and based on interrogation of theories in the field of International Relations, recent research, online material and various case studies from recent years. There is relatively little literature on this innovative area of research and this will imply increased reliance on online resources. The study will aim to develop new theory and use heuristic case studies to test and validate it, as proposed by Lijphart (1971).

The case studies chosen to test our theory will feature approaches based on structured focused comparison (George and Bennett 2007) and process tracing (Van Evera 2009). The results from examining different combinations of independent variable values will be assessed to help develop theories on the causal relations between the dependent variable (the political change effects of cyber-MNCs) and the independent variables (state capacity and state political regime).

The process tracing technique will be used in relation to our hypothesis. The suggested premise is that the exploitation of MNCs’ knowledge power and infrastructure affects citizens’ perceptions, beliefs and, therefore, actions, effecting change in sovereign state power and the political ecosystem. Citizens’ perceptions and beliefs may be influenced by cyber-MNC targeted information, echo chambers, fake news, and other phenomena and this may alter their political efficacy. Political efficacy here means the sense that an individual’s political action has an impact on the political process (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954). Internal political efficacy refers to an individual’s competence in understanding and participating in politics (Niemi et al. 1991) whereas external political efficacy relates more to individuals’ attitudes toward a political system (Acock and Clarke 1990).

Case studies will show that changes in state power and the political ecosystem can have a variety of effects, from affecting election processes to revolutions and threats to citizens’ physical security. The effects MNCs have can be very easily shift from the promotion of revolutionary ideals (freedom, dignity, social justice) to facilitating political polarization and inter-group hatred (Shehabat 2015).

The study will seek to assess why the same phenomena have variant impacts politically and in terms of power erosion in different states, comparing liberal to authoritarian states and weak ones to strong. There will eight case studies, two for each category researched (see table above). In the strong liberal category, the study will examine the possible impact cyber-MNCs had on the 2016 US presidential election and the UK Brexit referendum, both of which were close-run contests. In the strong authoritarian category, Russia’s alleged interventions in several liberal countries’ elections through manipulating cyber-MNC infrastructure and the Chinese state’s battle for the internet sovereignty will be assessed. In the weak liberal category, the rise of populist leaders in Brazil and Mexico using cyber social media will be examined. In the weak authoritarian category, the role cyber-MNCs played in the Egypt revolution, part of the Arab spring and the hate speech encouraging the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar will be investigated.

8. Research contribution and limitations

The study will set out to present an innovative argument: that cyber-MNCs may have four different and distinct kinds of effect on the political ecosystem and power of sovereign states explained by the different possible combinations of two independent variables, being state capacity and state political regime. Casual relationships between variations in state capacity and state political regime and variations in the effect cyber-MNCs have on state political stability will be identified.

The extant literature regarding power in the international system refers to MNCs as homogeneous actors, usually responsible for power erosion in host countries in the developing world. The study will set out to demonstrate that cyber-MNCs, particularly those possessing knowledge power, produce a complicated array of effects, from intensifying strong authoritarian states to destabilizing weak ones. They can cause polarization and contribute to the rise of populist voices in strong liberal states and push radicalized weak liberal ones toward regime change.

The study will contribute to International Relations literature on state power diffusion and erosion due the unique effect MNCs have by detailing the attributes of cyber-MNCs and Internet technology as they relate to state capacity and political regime.

Not all states are as yet are going through the same process as others in their category, but the study will serve as a warning sign for other states with otherwise the same characteristics that the process is not yet fully discernable in.

The main challenge of this research lies in the question as to whether cyber-MNCs are the main causal factor in the relationship between the independent and dependent variables outlined above. There may be many reasons for power erosion in sovereign states, but the study will seek to show the major role cyber-MNCs have played in all of our case studies. An example in this regard is Cambridge Analytica’s last-minute activities in six crucial US states (Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Florida) which, combined with a system that awards all of a state’s designated electors to the presidential candi­date with the most popular votes, resulted in Trump’s 2016 victory (Gonzalez 2017).

The study is limited to case studies from recent years. This area of research addresses a highly dynamic area, with leading MNCs changing their products and behavior to minimize the effects that will be detailed in this research. It is likely to take years to sufficiently address all the issues arising out of this research, recognizing too that some of the damage done is irreversible, something which makes this research nonetheless still relevant.

Some methodological challenges arise out of the decision to use databases and reports as data sources, something which could create overdependence not only on that data but also on the different variables applied in its collection. This needs to be taken into account in the analysis, though we should also note that these reports are relied upon by many scholars as trustworthily benign.

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