Defining Digital Authoritarianism

James S. Pearson (Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam)

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Abstract

It is becoming increasingly common for authoritarian regimes to leverage digital technologies to surveil, repress and manipulate their citizens. Experts typically refer to this practice as “digital authoritarianism” (DA). Existing definitions of DA consistently presuppose a politically repressive agent *intentionally* exploiting digital technology in pursuit of authoritarian ends. I refer to this as the *intention-based definition*. This paper argues that this definition is untenable as a general description of DA. I begin by illustrating the current predominance of the intention-based definition (Section 1). Section 2 then presents four counterexamples to this definition: benign surveillance; digital sovereignty; attention-harvesting algorithms; and tech-induced loneliness. In each case, we witness authoritarianism being promoted by digital technologies without any evidence of this being intentionally caused by politically repressive agents. Based on these observations, I contend that the intention-based definition is underinclusive and therefore unsustainable. Section 3 then outlines an improved definition of DA – what I call the *promotion-based* definition. Since this more expansive definition does not posit intentional, politically repressive agency as a precondition of DA, it can accommodate the counterexamples discussed in Section 2. Moreover, it enables us to catch a broader spectrum of cases of DA, such as tech-induced loneliness, which those adhering to the intention-based definition are prone to overlook. After outlining further practical benefits of the promotion-based definition, I argue that we still need to distinguish between intentional and unintentional forms of DA since they call for distinct types of remedial action.

Keywords: authoritarianism; democracy; digital technology; algorithms; loneliness; sovereignty; surveillance; privacy; social media.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, authoritarianism has been steadily on the rise while liberal democracy has been in global decline (Repucci and Slipowitz 2022). During the same period, there has been a rapid development and widespread proliferation of digital technologies. Multiple experts suggest that these seemingly independent trends are causally connected (e.g. Deibert 2015; Dragu and Lupu 2015; Lamensch 2021; Weiss 2020). They argue that the swift expansion of digital technology is *facilitating* the growth of authoritarianism, a perspective that sharply contrasts with the once common belief that technologies such as the internet would enhance free speech and democracy.[[1]](#footnote-2) These experts typically refer to this dynamic as *digital authoritarianism* (DA) or, alternatively, as *digital repression.*[[2]](#footnote-3)

Commentators broadly describe DA as “the use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations” (Polyakova and Meserole 2019, 1; for similar definitions see Section 1 of this paper). The way the Chinese Communist Party has leveraged facial recognition software to surveil China’s Uighur population would on this definition be a clearcut case of DA (as documented by Shahbaz 2018; Lamensch 2021; Polyakova and Meserole 2019). The problem with this definition – let’s term it the *intention-based definition* – is that it presupposes that DA involves politically repressive agents *intentionally* exploiting digital technologies in their pursuit of authoritarian ends. This is problematic because we find these same experts discussing, under the umbrella of DA, ways that digital technology systematically fosters authoritarianism *without* any politically repressive agents intentionally causing these effects. For instance, Steven Feldstein recounts how in Norway, during the COVID-19 pandemic, democratic leaders implemented an invasive contact-tracing app, one that constituted a quasi-authoritarian system of surveillance (Feldstein 2021, 278). Yet all the available evidence suggests that the guiding intention of the Norwegian government was to ensure public health. For example, its benign intentions seem to be largely confirmed by the fact that it swiftly deactivated the app following the release of an Amnesty International report that identified serious privacy issues with its contact-tracing technology.

This paper explores the tension between the current usage of the term DA and the intention-based definition. I argue that the intention-based definition is, as it stands, untenable and requires revision. Far from being an empty academic enterprise, I emphasize why redefining DA promises to yield real practical advantages. Perhaps most obviously, because those seeking to combat DA must have clarity about the precise nature of what they are opposing. Moreover, because the intention-based definition is excessively narrow, it can lead commentators to overlook potentially severe forms of DA.

In Section 1, I commence by surveying existing definitions of DA, underscoring their consistent requirement that a politically repressive agent be *intentionally* misusing digital technologies for authoritarian purposes. In essence, these definitions all turn out to be iterations of the intention-based definition. In Section 2, I present four counterexamples to this definition: benign surveillance; digital sovereignty; attention-harvesting algorithms; and tech-induced loneliness. In each case, we witness authoritarianism being promoted by digital technologies without any evidence of this being intentionally caused by politically repressive agents. Notably, the first three of these counterexamples are drawn from expert discussions of DA. The fourth counterexample – tech-induced loneliness – is structurally analogous to the first three, and therefore qualifies as DA, yet is not caught by experts. Based on these observations, I contend that the intention-based definition is underinclusive and therefore unsustainable. Section 3 then outlines an improved definition of DA – what I call the *promotion-based definition*. Since this more expansive definition does not posit intentional, politically repressive agency as a precondition of DA, it can accommodate the counterexamples discussed in Section 2. Further, it enables us to catch a broader spectrum of cases of DA, such as tech-induced loneliness, which those adhering to the intention-based definition are prone to overlook. After outlining further practical benefits of the promotion-based definition, I argue that we still need to distinguish between intentional and unintentional forms of DA since they call for distinct types of remedial action.

# 1. The Intention-Based Definition

Let us begin by examining some existing definitions of DA. As mentioned above, Alina Polyakova and Chris Meserole (2019, 1) describe DA as “the use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations.” This definition has been influential and is cited by multiple other commentators (see, e.g., Jones 2021, 2; Dictionary of Populism n.d.).[[3]](#footnote-4) On this definition, DA occurs when authoritarian regimes intentionally exploit digital technologies to repressively control their citizens. One issue this immediately raises is that authoritarian practices are often present in hybrid or even democratic regimes, which cannot be unequivocally labeled authoritarian (Glasius 2018). Erol Yayboke and Samuel Brannen (2020, 2) appear to take this into account when they define DA “as the use of the internet and related digital technologies by leaders with authoritarian tendencies to decrease trust in public institutions, increase social and political control, and/or undermine civil liberties.” Likewise, Steven Feldstein (2021, 25) advances a definition of digital repression (synonymous with DA) that acknowledges that the practice can occur in regimes that are not strictly classified as authoritarian: “*I define digital repression as the use of information and commu­nications technology to surveil, coerce, or manipulate individuals or groups in order to deter specific activities or beliefs that challenge the state*” (original emphasis).[[4]](#footnote-5)For Feldstein, as for Yayboke and Brannen, then, DA can coherently occur in democracies. This is a significant improvement on the definition offered by Polyakova and Meserole, because some of the most vigorous practitioners of DA, such as Putin’s government in Russia (Lamensch 2021), are regimes that cannot straightforwardly be categorized as authoritarian. But whether or not these authors confine DA to authoritarian regimes, they all similarly describe it as the intentional use(or rather abuse) of digital technologies by politically repressive agents. This is why I am referring to this characterization of DA as the *intention-based* definition.

Before we go on to evaluate the intention-based definition, it is essential to clarify the concept of authoritarianism, as it carries diverse connotations. Some (e.g., Svolik 2012, 22–23) classify an authoritarian regime as one that simply fails to meet either of the following two criteria of democracy: (a) “free and competitive elections” and (b) “an executive that is elected either directly in free and competitive presidential elections or indirectly by a legislature in parliamentary systems.” Svolik considers “authoritarianism” and “dictatorship” to be interchangeable terms. However, I will adopt a more expansive understanding of “authoritarian,” wherein it denotes any practice or web of practices that *foster* the conditions of dictatorship just mentioned. This aligns with the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023) definition of the adjective “authoritarian” as anything or anyone “Favourable to or characterized by obedience to authority as opposed to personal liberty; strict, dictatorial.” Consequently, a practice might qualify as authoritarian if it undermines freedom of speech, suppresses political pluralism and civil liberties, obstructs accountability, misinforms, or threatens citizens in a manner compromising their capacity to vote, and so forth. Even within a democracy, a practice that undermines any of these pillars of democratic liberty could be considered favorable to dictatorship and, to that extent, authoritarian. Political agents, such as individual leaders or regimes, would then qualify as authoritarian if they systematically engage in such practices.

# 2. Counterexamples to the Intention-Based Definition

Does the intention-based definition withstand scrutiny? In this section, I contend that it does not, and to demonstrate this, I present four cases of DA that the intention-based definition is unable to accommodate. The first three of these are discussed by multiple experts under the heading of DA, even though they diverge from the intention-based definition explicitly advocated by some of these same theorists. The fourth counterexample is isomorphic with the other three, and I argue that it can therefore be categorized as DA, even though it again diverges from the intention-based definition.

## 2.1. Benign Surveillance and the Chilling Effect

The most compelling counterexample is that of benign surveillance, particularly instances where governments implement digital systems to monitor citizens with the aim of ensuring public health, especially during times of crisis. Despite these noble intentions, however, such surveillance systems can end up restricting citizens’ de facto liberties in a manner that qualifies as authoritarian. In an article scrutinizing how the pandemic has fueled the spread of DA, Lydia Khalil (2020, 28) sheds light on how “Many democracies have accepted new infringements on privacy, bypassing the usual legislative processes of scrutiny and consideration in the interests of pandemic mitigation.” In a similar vein, Steven Feldstein discusses how during the COVID-19 pandemic, the governments of Norway, Bahrain and Kuwait rolled out contact-tracing apps that violated citizens’ privacy. At the time, Claudio Guarnieri, Head of Amnesty International’s Security Lab, asserted that by deploying these apps, these governments ran “roughshod over people’s privacy, with highly invasive surveillance tools which go far beyond what is justified in efforts to tackle COVID-19” (Amnesty International 2020; see also Sadowski 2020). Feldstein (2021, 278) presents this as an example of the way in which “governments are implementing new surveillance techniques in a rushed and ad hoc manner.” Feldstein notes that soon after the publication of Amnesty’s report, Norway withdrew the offending app. However, the context of this example in Feldstein’s latest book, *The Rise of Digital Repression*, strongly indicates that he considers the Norway case an example of DA.

Regardless of how we interpret this case, it starkly contradicts the intention-based definition. The primary issue arises from the fact that the government of Norway ostensibly introduced its contact tracing app with the aim of safeguarding public health. If we take the Norwegian regime at its word, there is no politically repressive intention behind these policies.

One could argue that such trust is simply naïve. This view seems to be justified in the case of Bahrain, which is commonly recognized as an authoritarian regime.[[5]](#footnote-6) But even if we are right in suspecting the Bahraini government of pursuing ulterior repressive motives with its contact-tracing app, we cannot be *certain* that the regime’s intention was repressive as opposed to protective. And yet we want to be able to designate this surveillance system as an instance of DA without the necessity of conclusively establishing that the regime intentionally designed it to repress Bahraini citizens.

In contrast to Bahrain, we have significantly less reason to question the sincerity of the Norwegian government, given its robust democratic credentials.[[6]](#footnote-7) This is further supported by the fact that the Norwegian government deactivated the app following the publication of Amnesty’s report. But why might we want to consider such cases – that is, cases where the operative intentions are murky (as in the case of Bahrain), or convincingly benign (as in the case of Norway) – as instances of DA?

Firstly, we can argue that such surveillance systems promote authoritarianism by laying the foundations for it. As Rob Kitchin (2020, 371) warns, “The fine-grained mass tracking of movement, proximity to others, and knowledge of some form of status (beyond health, for example) will enable tighter forms of control.” These surveillance systems provide the infrastructure necessary for effective authoritarianism. Constructing such infrastructure leaves people vulnerable to leaders with authoritarian aspirations in the future. In this scenario, the danger is still dependent upon the politically repressive intentions of potential authoritarian agents downstream. However, it is evident that commentators like Feldstein want to categorize and criticize these systems under the rubric of DA, irrespective of whether such hypothetical agents *actually* materialize. Thus, such surveillance – even when implemented by benign politicians, and regardless of any actively repressive force they might exert – can be considered DA because it renders people *susceptible* to potential authoritarian agents, thereby inadvertently favoring authoritarianism.

But we might also label such surveillance systems as DA due to the fact that even when motivated by benevolently protective concerns, they nonetheless generate politically repressive effects. As Rob Kitchin (2020, 371) observes, aside from *enabling* authoritarianism, excessive surveillance is also “likely to have a chilling effect on protest and democracy.” The rationale for this claim runs as follows: when people are subjected to surveillance, they *self*-discipline or *self*-censor out of fear of potential punishment by a hypothetical authoritarian agent. The concern is that a possibly existing, or possibly forthcoming authoritarian political agent could potentially access the data obtained by such surveillance and punish citizens for behavior deemed politically subversive. This phenomenon is known as the *chilling effect*, or alternatively, *panopticism*, referring to Foucault’s account of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* (Manokha 2018).

Empirical research has substantiated the idea that surveillance, or even perceived surveillance, often triggers this chilling effect. Researchers theorize that contact-tracing apps may induce this effect (Rowe 2020; Kitchin 2020), especially among immigrant members of the population, who frequently seek to blend in to safeguard their citizenship claims.[[7]](#footnote-8) Those using contact-tracing apps might avoid visiting gay bars, participating in political protests, or attending the meetings of dissenting political groups out of fear of potential punishment, even if these activities are at present perfectly legal. In such cases, even if the surveillance is motivated by liberal, democratic and benign political agents, the de facto impact on individual liberty is much the same as it would be if the surveillance was intentionally implemented for politically repressive ends. Given that many people are likely to behave *as if* such surveillance is monitored by an authoritarian agent, there are compelling grounds for considering intensive contact-tracing apps as a form of DA. Without any intentionally repressive agency, these apps foster authoritarianism by de facto eroding political pluralism, freedom of expression, and citizens’ liberty to pursue their individual conceptions of the good life. As Seva Gunitsky (2020) has remarked, “When it comes to surveillance, a clear line between autocratic and democratic states is becoming increasingly harder to draw” (see also Weiss 2020). From this standpoint, Norway’s contact-tracing app would qualify as DA even during the short time that it was deployed, and despite the (presumably) benign intentions of its creators.

The same chilling effect, where people self-censor to conform to hegemonic norms, can also be generated by the fear of *peer* surveillance (see Manokha 2018). Social media has enabled close monitoring of an individual’s life by their peers, and the pervasive presence of smartphones increases the risk of one’s actions being recorded and publicized. Consequently, there is a heightened probability of one’s actions being ridiculed or criticized by one’s peers and possibly even the broader community. Once again, the point is that digital technologies are eroding freedom of speech, suppressing political pluralism and obstructing civil liberties in a manner that qualifies as authoritarian, and they are doing so without the intentional involvement of any politically repressive agents.

## 2.2. Digital Sovereignty

The second counterexample involves the concept of digital sovereignty, where “each government [imposes] its own internet regulations in a manner that restricts the flow of information across national borders” (Shahbaz and Funk 2020). An illustrative instance of this is the Chinese Communist Party’s prohibition of Instagram, WhatsApp, Gmail, and Wikipedia, along with a host of other apps and websites (for a comprehensive list, see Binns 2023). This type of legislation is not, however, exclusive to authoritarian regimes, as an increasing number of liberal democracies are actively pursuing digital sovereignty (Shahbaz and Funk 2020). A prominent example of this was President Trump’s 2020 attempt to ban new downloads of TikTok, ostensibly driven by concerns that the Chinese government could exploit the app to acquire extensive data from US citizens. At the time, Wilbur Ross wrote of how in using TikTok, “data on locality, data on what you are streaming toward, what your preferences are, what you are referencing, every bit of behavior that the American side is indulging in becomes available to whoever is watching on the other side” (quoted in Swanson et al. 2020). Such surveillance poses a particular threat to any US citizens who regularly travel to China or have ties, familial or business, with the country. If the Chinese authorities perceive them as engaging in subversive behavior, the freedom of these citizens could be jeopardized. In their critique of digital sovereignty, Adrian Shahbaz and Allie Funk (2020) also discuss the 2020 decision of the EU’s Court of Justice to invalidate a major EU–US data-sharing agreement on the grounds that it exposed EU citizens to privacy violations, especially from US intelligence services. Though a new agreement was negotiated in 2022 (European Commission 2023), the court’s ruling in 2020 created a partial digital blockade between the US and the EU.

Trump’s attempt to restrict new downloads of TikTok, much like the benign surveillance discussed in the preceding section, purportedly aimed to protect US citizens from repressive Chinese DA. And the EU’s Court of Justice was likewise ostensibly trying to shield EU citizens from invasive US surveillance that might contravene their privacy rights. Nonetheless, Shahbaz and Funk (2020) categorize Trump’s and the EU’s actions as instances of DA, stating that, “Even when aimed at curbing repressive practices, these actions serve to legitimize the push for each state to oversee its own ‘national internet,’ which was previously championed only by autocratic governments in countries such as China, Iran, and Russia”. Similarly, Erol Yayboke and Samuel Brannon (2020, 9) oppose the construction of “digital walls,” “which could be used as examples and excuses by China and other advocates of a more fragmented – and centrally controlled – Internet.”[[8]](#footnote-9) According to this perspective, the quest for digital sovereignty, even when honestly pursued in the name of democratic freedom, falls under the heading of DA because it legitimizes the repressive quest for digital sovereignty by authoritarian or hybrid regimes. While we might suspect Trump of using the idea of digital sovereignty to promote ulterior authoritarian ends, the point here is that *even if* we give him the benefit of the doubt and assume that his reasons were genuine, he would still be guilty of engaging in DA. The subtext of these criticisms is that seeking digital sovereignty, even for democratic purposes, amounts to DA, because it implicitly endorses, and thereby fosters, authoritarian modes of governance.

This claim is open to various objections, perhaps most notably the argument that intolerance towards those who threaten the institutions of democratic liberty is a necessary condition of real-life democracy, and such intolerance does more to fortify democracy than it does to compromise it.[[9]](#footnote-10) It would therefore be erroneous to characterize this form of intolerance as authoritarian, though the abovementioned critics of digital sovereignty seem to be doing exactly this. However, we can remain agnostic regarding the actual authoritarianism of seeking digital sovereignty. What matters is that experts consider the pursuit of digital sovereignty under the umbrella of DA, even when they assume it to be motivated by *anti*-repressive, democratic intentions.

## 2.3. Attention-Harvesting Algorithms

Another counterexample to the intention-based definition is to be found in discussions of attention-harvesting algorithms, particularly in the context of social media. Social media platforms strategically aim to maximize user engagement to expose users to more advertising content, thereby generating revenue. Lewandowski et al. (2020, 5) emphasize how this business model can compromise core democratic values: “Curated newsfeeds and automated recommender systems are designed to maximize user attention by satisfying their presumed preferences, which can mean highlighting polarising, misleading, extremist or otherwise problematic content to maximize user engagement.”

While Facebook has defended its algorithms by claiming to protect free speech (Horwitz and Seetharaman 2020), Steven Feldstein (2021, 280) disagrees, asserting that “Free speech does not mean that those who shout the loudest and spout the most polarizing rhetoric are the only ones who should be heard.” According to Feldstein, Facebook’s promotion of extreme and polarizing news content played an instrumental role in elevating many authoritarian leaders, including Rodrigo Duterte, into power (160–162). Similarly, Lydia Khalil (2020, 28) has criticized established democracies’ “permissiveness” in allowing “the digital communications sector to develop in a way that has exacerbated polarisation.” She flags this as yet another instance of the “creeping acceptance of digital authoritarianism” within democratic nations.

Another reason Feldstein frames Facebook’s attention-harvesting algorithms as a potential case of DA is insofar as its group suggestion function steers users into extremist political groups. Feldstein (2021, 271) cites an example taken from Facebook’s own internal research*,* which established that“64 percent of all extremist group joins are due to our rec­ommendation tools”. Most of these joins were a direct result of Facebook’s “Groups You Should Join and Discover” algorithms. And Facebook themselves conceded that their “recommenda­tion systems grow the problem.”

For Feldstein, the twin impacts of attention-harvesting algorithms – their tendency to polarize and radicalize – are detrimental to the vitality of democracy and conducive to authoritarianism.[[10]](#footnote-11) It is on these grounds that he treats them as potential instances of DA. However, he explicitly acknowledges that these algorithms are not intentionally designed for politically repressive purposes, noting how, “At present, the overriding incentive that Facebook and other platforms follow is revenue and profit … In most cases, if the content increases user engagement, then the algorithm will bump up its visibility” (Feldstein 2021, 271). Khalil (2020, 28) points to the same profit-oriented intentions when she writes of how weak regulation has allowed “major technology companies to amass huge amounts of information that can be deployed to condition and modify individual behaviour for profit”. Once again, we encounter a situation where a practice is being branded as DA, though the practice is neither developed nor maintained with politically repressive intentions, the guiding intention in this instance being financial gain.

There are two potential objections to framing attention-harvesting algorithms as *unintentionally* authoritarian. First, one might contend that this *is* a case of intentional DA, as extremist groups are deliberately exploiting these algorithms to disseminate polarizing propaganda and recruit new members. While this objection is partially valid, its limitation lies in the fact that these extremists are not the architects or custodians of these algorithms. Additionally, their awareness of these algorithms’ influence is likely only vague. A more accurate way of describing the situation is to say that social media platforms, like Facebook, are *using* authoritarian content that has always in a certain sense been in circulation and strategically funneling its users in its direction, with the aim of maximizing attention capture. It is this effect – which I will refer to as the *funneling effect* – that we are interested in, and it appears to have been engineered with financial profit as opposed to political repression in mind.

It is imperative to recognize that tech companies at some point typically become aware of the authoritarian consequences of their algorithms. As we have just seen, Facebook were informed of such effects by research the company itself commissioned (Horwitz and Seetharaman 2020). If, following such revelations, company executives choose to overlook the anti-democratic impact of these algorithms, then it becomes reasonable to consider such impact as at least partially intentional. Nonetheless, prior to executives receiving such information, these authoritarian algorithms might reasonably be deemed vectors of *unintentional* DA.

Determining whether and to what extent conglomerates such as Meta deliberately propagate anti-democratic political views is a challenging task. But insisting on definitive proof of intentional involvement before categorizing these trends as instances of DA appears overly stringent. Indeed, Feldstein himself seems to be quite willing to treat these instances under the heading of DA, even if this contradicts his endorsement of the intention-based definition.

## 2.4. Tech-Induced Loneliness

The final counterexample to explore is tech-induced loneliness. While attention-harvesting algorithms contribute to this phenomenon, it has a range of other potential causes, such as gaming disorder and digital nomadism, and so merits separate consideration. In social psychology, loneliness is defined as “a distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that one’s social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one’s social relationships” (Hawkley and Cacioppo 2010, 218). It is vital to differentiate loneliness from isolation, the latter being an objective condition where an individual lacks social connectivity. One can be objectively isolated without experiencing the distress of loneliness. This happens, for example, when one takes pleasure in one’s own company and experiences the positive feeling of *solitude*. Conversely, an individual can feel lonely in the company of others, particularly if they perceive that company as oppressive or competitive. This section aims to demonstrate that there are solid empirical grounds supporting the idea that the loneliness induced by digital technologies – referred to here as *tech-induced loneliness* – can cultivate authoritarianism. Consequently, I submit that we should recognize tech-induced loneliness as a case of DA, even in the absence of a politically repressive agent actively driving this effect.

The idea that loneliness drives authoritarianism was eloquently articulated by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* Arendt (1979, 475) describes loneliness as “the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government”. According to Arendt, the modern crisis of loneliness is severe and has “become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century” (478). While she remains somewhat enigmatic about the root cause of this surge of loneliness, Arendt predominantly attributes it to the unique economic conditions of modernity.

The imperative need to travel for employment not only deprives people of a stable political community but also begets a pervasive sense of uprootedness.[[11]](#footnote-12) In the absence of political community, people find themselves shut off from “the trusting and trustworthy company of [their] equals.” Without meaningful social intercourse, individuals are susceptible to feelings of being adrift and uncertain of themselves, making it difficult for them to experience isolation as serene solitude, and making it far more likely that they will experience such isolation as painful loneliness. In their quest for self-certainty, individuals become vulnerable to the organizing logic presented by totalitarian ideologies. These ideologies offer people an artificially clear understanding of themselves, their role in society, and the overarching order of the world.

Arendt’s analysis is highly speculative, and neglects the more basic point that when individuals feel lonely and are marginalized from traditional community structures – like family, religious groups, labor unions, and social clubs – they become vulnerable to the allure of fraternity promised by radical political groups.[[12]](#footnote-13) Empirical evidence, however, supports Arendt’s claims regarding the severity and prevalence of loneliness and its potential to drive individuals towards anti-democratic or overtly authoritarian ideologies. US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy (2023) recently issued a warning about an “epidemic of loneliness” in the West. Although loneliness is difficult to measure, studies indicate that approximately a third of people living in industrialized countries currently experience loneliness, with one in twelve being severely affected (Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2018).

Beyond the serious health implications, including risks equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2017), loneliness has been shown to adversely impact democracy and representative government (Murthy 2023). Voter participation is significantly motivated by a sense of civic or patriotic duty, as well as the belief that one is likely to be affected by the outcome of elections. However, when individuals experience lonely isolation from their community, they are less likely to feel a civic duty to vote, or to feel as though the outcome of the election will affect them, resulting in reduced voter turnout (Langenkamp 2021). Further, research has demonstrated that when people are embedded in strong social networks, political participation increases (Campbell 2013).

Given that loneliness undermines citizens’ commitment to democratic politics, it is unsurprising that a US study found a significant association between adults reporting loneliness and an endorsement of right-wing authoritarian views (Floyd 2017). While not establishing a causal relationship, other studies, such as Brown et al. (2021), suggest that such a link may exist. In this study, former radicalized US citizens were interviewed about their turn to extremist politics, and a significant proportion of them identified feelings of loneliness as a key driver of their radicalization.

Although digital technologies have the capacity to cultivate social connectivity, strong evidence suggests that these technologies also exacerbate loneliness. Vivek Murthy (2023) singles them out as a primary cause of the epidemic of loneliness. Social media and gaming addiction, which can displace time with family and friends, are the typical pathways by which this occurs. Primack et al. (2017), for instance, established a positive correlation between the time spent on social media and self-reported loneliness, while Hunt (2018) found evidence that reducing social media usage significantly decreases loneliness and depression.

Gaming disorder has also been implicated in severe forms of lonely social isolation, exemplified in the practice of hikikomori, where adolescents isolate themselves from society and their families for extended periods, often developing gaming addictions and intense feelings of loneliness (Kato 2020). This aspect of the problem is notably associated with attention-harvesting algorithms. Additionally, digital technologies have enabled forms of remote working which have been shown to worsen loneliness. For instance, digital nomadism, where people work in a country other than their place of employment (Miguel et al. 2023), and remote work. While the latter often affords individuals more time with their family, it is also associated with increased levels of loneliness as they struggle to maintain the informal connections with coworkers “that are typically associated with building a sense of belonging” (Dery and Hafermalz 2016, 109).

The fact that tech-induced loneliness corrodes representative democracy does not in principle mean that it facilitates authoritarianism. In practice, however, this appears to be the case. This hypothesis finds support in the highly effective recruitment strategy employed by the alt-right in the US. Steve Bannon, who led Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, stated that while working in the internet gaming sector he discovered an army of “rootless white males.” Later, as the executive chairman of the alt-right website *Breitbart News,* he deliberately targeted this audience. According to a Cambridge Analytica whistleblower, during Trump’s presidential campaign, Bannon also targeted “incels” (involuntarily celibate men), a demographic known to suffer from lonely social isolation (Sparks 2023). Bannon openly acknowledged how these lonely groups of men were primed for right-wing authoritarian politics by gaming platforms and internet forums, stating “You can activate that army. They come in through Gamergate or whatever and then get turned onto politics and Trump” (quoted in Clinton 2023).

This reveals that not only does excessive gaming and use of social media promote loneliness, but authoritarian propagandists, such as Bannon, intentionally prey on those who have been rendered lonely in this way. Given the compelling reasons to suspect tech-induced loneliness of fostering authoritarianism, it seems appropriate to consider it under the heading of DA. Tech-induced loneliness appears to render individuals vulnerable to authoritarian manipulation in a manner akin to benign surveillance. Importantly, though, tech-induced loneliness does not seem to be intentionally propagated by politically repressive agents; rather, it emerges as a byproduct of excessive internet use or gaming, which are designed to be as addictive as possible by agents principally seeking financial gain rather than political control. This process facilitates authoritarianism – and so can reasonably be labelled DA – before any authoritarian recruiters, such as Bannon, actively attempt to corral those who have been rendered lonely and vulnerable.

3. Redefining DA: A Sketch

The four counterexamples elucidated in the preceding section debunk the intention-based definition of DA. But how might we redefine the notion such that it can accommodate instances like these? I suggest that we redefine DA as *any situation where digital technologies systematically promote authoritarian politics*. I will refer to this as the *promotion-based* *definition*. It is an improvement on the intention-based definition for multiple reasons. This section will articulate these reasons before explaining why we might want to retain the intention-based definition as a description of a subspecies of DA.

3.1. The Promotion-Based Definition

The first rationale for substituting the intention-based definition with the promotion-based definition is that the latter is descriptively superior to the former. As should be clear from the previous section, the more expansive, promotion-based definition more neatly captures current expert usage. Unlike the underinclusive intention-based definition, the promotion-based definition accommodates all the counterexamples detailed in the previous section. Moreover, it aligns with the current *Oxford English Dictionary*’s present definition of the adjective “authoritarian,” cited in Section 2, as “Favourable to or characterized by obedience to authority as opposed to personal liberty.” This definition does not necessitate the active involvement of repressive political agents for a situation to be deemed authoritarian. A social practice can be authoritarian without anyone having willed it to be so.[[13]](#footnote-14)

The promotion-based definition is also *pragmatically* superior to its intention-based counterpart. Theorists who address DA often propose policies aimed at preventing digital technologies from fostering authoritarianism. However, operating within the confines of the intention-based definition hampers their ability to coherently identify and discuss situations where digital technologies systematically foster authoritarianism without the clear input of politically repressive agents – either because there is no such input, or because such input is obscured from view and difficult to prove. While those who campaign against DA are evidently interested in such situations (see e.g., Gunitsky 2020; Khalil 2020; Feldstein 2021), they struggle to integrate them cohesively into their analyses due to their conflicting adherence to the intention-based definition. Consequently, these authors often treat these situations peripherally or only as an afterthought.

The promotion-based definition demands that this grey area be given central consideration in any discussion of DA. This emphasis is crucial because combatting forms of intentional DA, like authoritarian online misinformation or recruitment campaigns, necessitates regulating the design of the algorithms that curate internet users’ newsfeeds and group suggestions. As we have seen, these algorithms are liable to leave citizens vulnerable to the active efforts of authoritarian agents seeking popular support. The Bannon example from the previous section aptly illustrates this interconnected dynamic, highlighting the need to mitigate unintentional forms of DA to effectively combat its intentional forms.

In addition to enabling critics of DA to devise a coordinated battle plan, grouping intentional and ostensibly unintentional DA under the same conceptual banner is practically beneficial because tackling each of them requires reforming many of the same institutions in similar ways. For instance, Polyakova and Meserole (2019, 12) suggest that to thwart authoritarian misinformation (intentional DA), “governments should invest in raising public awareness around information manipulation. This should include funding educational programs that build digital critical thinking skills among youth.” Thomas et al. (2020) likewise recommend that universities teach digital literacy to mitigate the tech-induced loneliness of freshman students (unintentional DA). And Vivek Murthy (2020, 60) suggests that government and educators should counteract loneliness by “Build[ing] social connection into health curricula, including up-to-date, age-appropriate information on the consequences of social connection on physical and mental health, key risk and protective factors, and strategies for increasing social connection.” This would necessarily involve teaching young people how to use digital technologies without aggravating loneliness. Educating school and university students to avoid tech-induced loneliness and training them how to identify anti-democratic fake news would both serve to curb democratic backsliding and the corresponding growth of authoritarianism. Treating these as distinct endeavors, orchestrated by separate groups, would be needlessly inefficient, given their shared objective of reforming digital learning to nurture democratic values. This efficiency argument extends to efforts to regulate the tech sector, essential for curbing both intentional and unintentional DA. A unified, more holistic approach to policy reform is advisable, and the expansive promotion-based definition of DA would conceptually facilitate this endeavor.

3.2. Retaining a Distinction

Instead of outright discarding the intention-based definition, we should reconceptualize it as a subspecies within the broader framework of DA. Even with the adoption of the promotion-based definition, maintaining the distinction between intentional and unintentional DA remains valuable. This differentiation is crucial because diverse types of DA are sometimes going to call for distinct types of remedial action. Based on the preceding sections, we can draw the distinction as follows:

1. *Intentional DA*: Where a repressive agent intentionally leverages digital technologies to promote their authoritarian ends.
2. *Unintentional DA*: Where digital technologies systematically foster authoritarianism without this being intentionally caused by a politically repressive agent. (Note: In practice, we can usually only label cases that seem to fit this definition as *ostensibly* unintentional, recognizing that they might later be revealed to have been intentionally caused by an authoritarian agent.)

At the most basic level, distinguishing between intentional and unintentional DA is imperative because intentional DA calls for types of remedial action that would be ineffective in the face of unintentional DA, such as, perhaps most obviously, *punitive sanctions.* Those currently engaged in the fight against DA consistently advocate for democratic nations to impose economic and political sanctions on the authoritarian agents responsible for intentional DA. These punitive measures are meant to disincentivize DA, making it more costly and therefore less attractive as a political tool. But it would be futile to impose punitive sanctions on non-authoritarian agents that are in all likelihood *inadvertently* engaging in DA – such as the Norwegian government in the benign surveillance case discussed in Section 2.1. In such instances, a more effective approach would be to expose the ways in which the agent in question – for example, a political regime or tech company – is unintentionally engaging in DA. The expectation would then be that upon realizing the detrimental effects of their actions, the accidentally offending agent desists. If, despite awareness, they persist, the unintentional DA would transform into intentional DA, as it would then be unequivocally clear that the agent is now *knowingly* engaging in DA. This scenario would then warrant punitive measures designed to disincentivize intentional DA.

So, while there are practical benefits, particularly from the perspective of democratic activism, to conceptually grouping intentional and unintentional DA under the promotion-based definition, there are also tangible advantages to treating them as distinct subcategories. This approach allows for nuanced and context-specific remedial strategies, ensuring a more targeted and effective response to the diverse manifestations of DA.

4. Conclusion

The central aim of this paper has been to demonstrate that the intention-based definition is unsustainable as a general definition of DA. This claim should by now be incontrovertible. Section 2 delineated various types of DA that are evidently *not* intentionally orchestrated by agents seeking repressive political control. Further, we observed that many of these counterexamples are treated asinstances of DA by experts who explicitly adhere to the intention-based definition. Nonetheless, we found that these experts miss potentially severe cases of DA, such as tech-induced loneliness, which do not fit the underinclusive intention-based definition. In Section 3, I introduced a novel definition – the promotion-based definition – and showed how it improves upon its flawed predecessor. This alternative remains schematic and is offered only as a starting point for further discussion. Elaborating a comprehensive definition of DA is a task that goes beyond the scope of the current study. While some might perceive this study as an exercise in academic hair-splitting, it is anything but. For those dedicated to curtailing democratic backsliding and the concurrent rise of authoritarianism, it is essential that experts formulate a more coherent understanding of how digital technologies are propelling these trends. A definition of DA that encompasses intentional and unintentional forms alike, as well as instances where agency is unclear, should empower theorists to form an integrated plan of action, and to identify a wider spectrum of forms of DA.

The focus of this paper has been predominantly critical and negative, primarily identifying how digital technologies further authoritarianism with the underlying hope that this will enable activists and policymakers to obstruct these practices. However, one of the most effective tactics for counteracting the repressive, authoritarian tendencies of digital technology is not merely to prevent these, but to engineer and regulate technology such that it actively favors democratic flourishing. The critical thrust of this paper should therefore not blind us to the complimentary need to actively enhance the democratic potential of the digital sphere.[[14]](#footnote-15)

One important finding of this paper is that critics of DA, and indeed of authoritarianism in general, would do well to pay closer attention to the myriad ways authoritarianism can be fostered without the malevolent, repressive input of authoritarian agents. In this sense, our analysis of DA has a marked Foucauldian dimension. Those wishing to preserve democracy should of course first attend to situations where authoritarian agents are intentionally abusing digital technologies. While addressing situations where authoritarian regimes intentionally abuse digital technologies is paramount, experts must not overlook the impersonal social, technological, and market forces that surreptitiously compel democratic citizens toward increasingly authoritarian modes of collective behavior.

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1. For an example of this optimism, see Diamond and Plattner (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. In treating these and other related terms as synonymous, I follow Feldstein (2021, 25), who writes: “Experts have used terms such as ‘digital authoritarianism’ and ‘algorithmic repression’ and ‘authoritarian tech’ almost interchangeably to describe what I am designating as digital repression”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. An almost identical definition is advanced by Lydia Khalil (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. On the synonymity of “digital repression” and DA for Feldstein, see fn.2, above. For an almost identical definition, see Eom and Lee (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Freedom house (2023a), for example, classifies Bahrain as “not free.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Freedom house (2023b) classifies Norway as “free” and describes it as “one of the most robust democracies in the world.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Moving to a cashless society for purposes of efficiency may have the same chilling effect, as citizens’ purchase-histories and movements are logged in intimate detail and remain theoretically retrievable by the authorities for an indefinite period. Since this would be enabled by digital technology, it might also be categorized as an instance of DA that is *not* ostensibly motivated by politically repressive ends. In this connection, Gunitsky (2020) has noted how, “With the collection and sharing of customer data as the driver of the digital economy, private monitoring … is becoming a ubiquitous and socially accepted feature of life in democratic states.” This monitoring by private companies could similarly produce the same chilling effect (for evidence, see Manokha 2018), despite its being driven by *financial* as opposed to politically repressive incentives. But again, notwithstanding this lack of politically repressive intentions, Gunitsky (2020) still labels this type of data collection as a case of DA. In a separate article, Gunitsky (2015, 44) points to another form of unintentional DA. He argues that social media, in offering citizens a digital forum in which to discharge their impulse to dissent might thereby reduce the likelihood of their engaging in *physical* protest, which is a far more effective means of preventing democratic backsliding. Although this type of DA is not analyzed in the current study, it certainly merits further critical attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See also Weiss’ (2020) discussion of “cyber sovereignty.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. For a more detailed account of this conception of democratic intolerance, see Marcuse (1969). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. There is some debate as to whether this polarizing effect is real and significant (compare e.g. Nyhan et al. 2023; Arguedas et al. 2022; Garcia 2023; and Lorenz-Spreen et al. 2023). But we need not enter this debate. For my argument, all we need remark is that Feldstein, who advances a variant of the intention-based definition, treats such polarization as a case of DA. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. “Loneliness … is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution” (Arendt 1979, 475). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. This allure was astutely observed by Eric Hoffer (1951, 34): “The ideal potential convert [to a mass movement] is the individual who stands alone, who has no collective body he can blend with and lose himself in and so mask the pettiness, meaninglessness and shabbiness of his individual existence.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Comparable claims have been advanced by a long line of ideology critics and neo-republicans. Discussing Bourdieu, Michael Freeden thus writes of how domineering ideologies “are social and cannot be traced back to any specific individual volition” (Freeden 2000, 311). For an example of the neo-republican view, see Alan Coffee’s (2015, 54) account of how patriarchal domination has been inadvertently reinforced by modern norms of citizenship: “Although a universal and ungendered ideal may have been intended … a model of citizenship emerged in which the activities that were considered socially productive were those associated with, and performed by, men.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. For examples of this more constructive approach, see Diamond and Plattner (2011) and Bernholz et al. (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)