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From Crisis to Control: An Investigation into the Amplification of Digital Repression by the State during Public Health Emergency
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From Crisis to Control: An Investigation into the Amplification of Digital Repression by the State during Public Health Emergency

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ABSTRACT

The post pandemic (COVID-19) world has been significantly different from the pre pandemic one. As the world embarks on creating and adjusting to a new normal it is important to acknowledge that the duration of the pandemic saw not only a public health crisis but also a political one. The body of literature provides a rich understanding of digital repression and its various dimensions. However, there is a gap in understanding digital repression in the context of public health emergency, particularly in democracies. The COVID-19 pandemic witnessed the convergence of a public health emergency and a political crisis, with significant implications for digital repression. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the intensification of digital repression in democracies during public health emergency, contributing to a broader understanding of the intersection between digital repression, emergency situations, and democratic governance. The academic and social relevance of this study lies in its potential to inform policy and decision-making during future public health emergencies. Additionally, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the impact of digital technologies on democratic values, human rights, and governance in the digital age. The findings conclude that the states tend to amplify digital repression during public health emergency situations.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, there has been a rise in the number of internet users around the world. The widespread usage of the internet has had a significant and unprecedented impact on a variety of facets of human life, including communication, education, commerce, and even our social interactions. One profound impact of the digital world is its ability to provide a platform for individuals to express their dissent for state and authorities. Previously, expressing dissent and challenging the status quo often required significant resources, access to traditional media, or physical gatherings. However, the spread of new and developing technologies over the past two decades has also greatly increased the toolkit available to authorities for repression and social control, worsening issues with human rights (Głowacka et al., 2021). Even though these technologies still have the potential to favourably advance democratic principles and human rights, many oppressive regimes are now actively deploying and influencing them for their own tactical advantages (Głowacka et al., 2021). For instance, pro-democracy activist Ko Jimmy from Myanmar, Rwandan critic Idamange Yvonne, journalist Miguel Mendoza Urbina from Nicaragua, and Belarusian opposition figure Siarhei Tsikhanouski all faced severe repercussions—ranging from death, imprisonment, to lengthy sentences—in response to their online criticisms of the oppressive regimes in their respective nations (Freedom House, 2022).

Digital repression can be characterised as the method state authorities use to rupture the flow of information, suppress dissents and uprising with the use of technology. This exertion of power is highly visible within contemporary societies a classic example of it could be the Arab Springs uprising among the middle eastern nations. Arab Springs which began in Tunisia in 2010 were pro-democracy uprisings that arose in various middle eastern states that actively challenged the existing autocratic regimes calling for social justice and a thorough political reform. The uprisings were highly mobilised through social media and extensive coverage across the region making the protest a major region wide uprising. The dual capacity of such technological advancements can be seen at play here wherein on one hand technology has been a catalyst for nations coming together in solidarity to fight suppressive authoritative regimes while on the other it has been used to repress and dissolve public expression of

dissent Earl et al. (2022). Thus, evolving nature of technologies make tracking of activists easier enabling undemocratic methods of approaching protests and demonstrations.

In recent times, the internet has proven to be especially useful as a platform for people to voice their disagreement and express their concerns over state actions and policies in the context of public emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. While the internet has long been acknowledged as a platform for people to express their thoughts under normal conditions, its importance is magnified during times of crisis when traditional modes of public communication and physical mobilisation may be hindered or prohibited. The internet realm has become a potent weapon that empowers people to break down geographical barriers and interact with a larger audience, thus promoting the dissemination of opposing viewpoints and worries about how the government responds to public emergencies.

While the extant literature (Bak et al., 2018; Earl et al., 2022; Feldstein, 2021; Głowacka et al., 2021; Gohdes, 2014) effectively discusses the utilisation of digitally repressive measures by autocratic states to further their control in normal circumstances, there is a need to study the employment of such repressive measures during situations like public health emergency in a democratic context.

In the past, authoritarian governments like the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, and North Korea have been linked to the widespread use of government monitoring. These regimes were infamous for their ubiquitous surveillance programs that violated people's civil liberties and privacy. However, there has been a clear shift in recent years, with even well-established liberal democracies accepting extensive surveillance techniques to keep tabs on their populace (Königs, 2022). Furthermore, prominent democratic nations including India, the United States, the Philippines, and Indonesia are experiencing the growing influence of digital tools in exerting control, as governments engage in surveillance and censorship of online content that criticises the state (Danescu, 2019). These measures frequently result in the targeted persecution of individuals using the internet. Surprisingly, even in democratic societies, there is often a lack of comprehensive frameworks that safeguard individuals who express dissenting views towards the government. These instances underscore the necessity of examining the relationship between democracy, digital repression, and public health crises. Understanding this connection is crucial in comprehending the implications and

dynamics of state power, political control, and the impact of emergency situations on individual freedoms within democratic systems.

Hence, study seeks to contribute to fill this gap and address the intersection of digital repression, democratic governance, and emergency situations by investigating the amplified manifestation of digital repression in democracies during public health emergencies. With the COVID-19 pandemic serving as a backdrop, where a public health emergency coincided with a political crisis, the reliance on digital information exacerbated the dissemination of misinformation and fake news, thereby amplifying the effects of digital repression.

Thus, it is important to ask the following question:

“How do situations like public health emergencies affect amplification of digital repression?”

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dissent occurs when groups outside the government join forces to apply pressure or pose a threat to their government, aiming to bring about a change in the current status-quo (Ritter & Conrad, 2016). Through both peaceful and violent means, dissenters engage in strikes, boycotts, riots, and non-violent protests, which can undermine the government's authority. In response to these power challenges, one strategy employed by governments is to suppress the dissident groups (Ritter & Conrad, 2016).

Christian Davenport (2007) defines state repression as the use or threat of physical punishment against individuals or organizations within a state's jurisdiction. Its purpose is to impose costs on the targets and deter activities or beliefs that are perceived as challenging to the government (Davenport, 2007). Repression can be directed at specific individuals or groups through actions like arrests, or it can be applied broadly to entire communities through measures like curfews or lockdowns (Davenport, 2007). To further theorise the state's response to dissent, he conceptualised “Law of Coercive Responsiveness” which states that “when challenges to the status quo take place, authorities generally employ some form of repressive action to counter or eliminate the behavioural threat; in short, there appears to be a “Law of Coercive Responsiveness.” (Davenport, 2007). Indiscriminate forms of repression, such as lockdowns and curfews, affect all residents within a certain geographical area, including both political dissenters and non-political civilians (Aksoy, Menger & Tavits, 2020).

While most of enforcement measures for such situations are non-violent, such as fines, there are cases where violations can result in imprisonment and, in extreme circumstances, even death (Brass, 2006). In the field of repression studies, Jennifer Earl (2003) conceptualised repression and presented a typology to provide us with a thorough grasp of its various forms and facets. She argues that repression can take the form of physical force, such as the deployment of tanks and tear gas, as well as more subtle methods, such as the imposition of taxes or legal restrictions.

In the recent times, technology has developed into a potent tool that can both liberate and stifle communities. Governments' use of these technologies to impose control, suppress dissent, and sway information flows has led to the alarming phenomena known as "digital repression," which helps governments maintain their power and control. This literature review explores the wide topic of digital repression and considers its intellectual underpinnings, manifestations, and societal implications. The review develops on this foundation before focusing on the unique context of digital repression in emergency situations, particularly public health emergencies, as the global COVID-19 pandemic serves as an example.

In alignment with the objective of this thesis, Barceló et al. (2022) analyze how governments exploit the COVID-19 pandemic to suppress political dissidents and limit civil liberties. They argue that during crises, governments capitalize on the opportunity to consolidate power and stifle opposition, employing various strategies disguised as public health measures. The authors discuss the utilization of emergency laws and executive orders that grant authorities broad powers to curtail fundamental rights and liberties. Governments target political opponents, activists, and independent journalists, branding them as threats to public health or national security. The paper also explores the manipulation of misinformation and disinformation by authorities to discredit dissenting voices and justify repressive actions. Additionally, the role of surveillance technologies is examined, where governments expand their capabilities under the pretext of contact tracing and public safety, but employ them to monitor and control political dissidents, further restricting civil liberties.

Digital repression has become a more prominent theme in recent writings on state repression in reaction to the opposition. Scholars have acknowledged that digital repression is two-dimensional in nature and can be both advantageous and harmful depending on how states and citizens use

technology (Earl et al., 2022; Feldstein, 2021; Gowacka et al., 2021; Gohdes, 2014). Steven Feldstein (2021) places a strong emphasis on the variety of forms that digital repression takes as well as how it affects politics, power dynamics, and resistance. The focus is placed on the expansion of large-scale surveillance systems, facial recognition technology, the use of social media to propagate misinformation and silence opponents, the silencing of competing viewpoints, and the limitations placed on free expression. As a result, the right to free speech is curtailed, the right to privacy is compromised, and public opinion is manipulated. Feldstein makes a big point of talking about how digital repression affects countries that defend democratic values. He emphasises the risks and challenges associated with democratic governments adopting digital tools for censorship, monitoring, and control. He talks on how actions performed in the name of public or national security might limit freedom of expression and violate people's right to privacy. Glowacka et al. (2021) studied the use of digital technologies by governments and other actors for repressive activities, including surveillance systems, social media monitoring, facial recognition, and data mining, to maintain political control and suppress resistance. The study also explored the spread of misinformation and how digital technologies can be leveraged to influence public opinion and undermine democratic processes through propaganda dissemination and online troll campaigns.

The complexity of digital repression and its effects on social movements, democratic processes, and state brutality have been recently discussed in the literature. A thorough analysis of the ways in which digital technologies are used to stifle social movements, protests, and activism is offered by both Gohdes (2014) and Earl et al. (2022). They talk about how using digital technologies might help activists communicate and work together more effectively. They also look at these technologies' more sinister aspects, such as how powerful people and governments use them to stifle dissent. Their study focuses on monitoring technology, social media platform manipulation, and cyberattacks that are deliberately planned to undercut and disrupt movements. The authors also emphasise the counterstrategies used by activists to fend off and evade digital repression, including encryption and the use of encrypted communication channels.

Bak et al. (2018), on the other hand, look into the connection between the internet and state repression and discover that higher internet penetration levels are linked to lower state repression. They do, however, issue a warning that repressive governments may adapt and use different techniques to stifle dissent, highlighting the necessity of continuing to be vigilant. Miller and Vaccari (2020) also draw attention to the difficulties that digital technologies present for democratic procedures, highlighting the significance of media literacy, transparency, and legislative safeguards.

This body of research broadens our understanding of the complex linkages between state violence, democratic government, and social movements on the internet. It discusses the need to balance the potential benefits of digital technology with the threats they pose to individuals' rights, liberties, and democratic principles. This literature examines the strategies employed by governments and activists as well as the role of technology in generating power relations in order to provide crucial insights into the evolving terrain of digital repression and feed policy discussions aimed at lessening its detrimental impacts.

For a thorough understanding of digital repression as a response to online criticisms and dissent, it is crucial to expand the research's focus to include emergency situations like natural disasters, terrorism, public health crises, and other comparable scenarios. The symptoms of digital repression are most obvious in these settings, and they are therefore deserving of close examination. Furthermore, Bjørkdahl and Carlsen (2019) focus specifically on pandemics when examining the dynamics of political interventions and public responses during public health crises. The authors examine how these crises affect public perception, inspire group action, and elicit different political responses.

They also underscore the significance of digital media in pandemic preparedness, emphasising that knowledge and use of digital media may be vital in future responses to such emergencies. They acknowledge that it may be too soon to completely theorise how authorities might take advantage of the "affordances" of digital media, but they believe that these platforms could possibly open new avenues for the government to build and assert its dominance over the populace. It wouldn't be careless to assert that these alarming predictions came true as the COVID-19 outbreak began. The

pre-pandemic environment has been very different from the post-pandemic (COVID-19) one. It is crucial to recognise that during the epidemic, there was a political crisis as well as a public health one as the world started to establish and adapt to a new normal. Crude ambitions and policies defined world politics during this time. The reliance on information that was distributed digitally increased the likelihood of conflicts because this information was frequently manipulated and distorted.

The academic and social relevance of this study lies in its potential to inform policy and decision-making during future public health emergencies. By shedding light on the unique challenges and implications of digital repression in democracies, policymakers can develop strategies to balance public health measures with the protection of individual rights and freedoms. This study contributes to a broader understanding of the impact of digital technologies on democratic values, human rights, and governance in the digital age. In addition, the academic relevance of this study also lies in its potential to inform policy and decision-making during future public health emergencies. By shedding light on the unique challenges and implications of digital repression in democracies, policymakers can develop strategies to balance public health measures with the protection of individual rights and freedoms. The research outcomes can guide the formulation of evidence-based policies that address digital repression effectively and safeguard democratic values.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section will provide an extensive discussion of the important ideas presented in this thesis, paying particular attention to the concepts of public health crisis and digital repression. The theoretical framework that forms the basis of this thesis will then be discussed in more detail. Additionally, the expected results of this study will be presented, shedding light on the expected outcome.

Public health Emergency

This study utilises the definition of public health emergency as conceptualised by Nelson et al. (2007) in their research article *Conceptualizing and Defining Public Health Emergency Preparedness*, according to which “public health emergencies are defined as much by their health consequences as

by their causes and precipitating events. A situation becomes emergent when its health consequences have the potential to overwhelm routine community capabilities to address them.” This conceptualisation aligns with the objective of this thesis which aims to study the elements of online repression by state in the context of the recent pandemic of COVID-19.

Digital repression

This thesis employs Steven Feldstein’s (2021) definition of *Digital Repression*. He defines 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” (Feldstein, 2021). This specific definition of the term was deemed most fit as it aligns with the objective of this study. Digital repression is an umbrella term which consists of repressive measures like surveillance, censorship and the targeted persecution of internet users. This thesis focuses on these three forms of repression in order to investigate the relationship between the occurrence of a public health emergency and the amplified use of digital repression.

Surveillance can be defined as the “monitoring, collecting, and/or processing of personal data by a government (Eck & Hatz, 2020). This can include the monitoring of online activity, location tracking via Bluetooth or Global Positioning System (GPS), tracking financial transactions, video surveillance, facial scans, and the collection of biometric data.” (Eck & Hatz, 2020).

Censorship can be defined as “a government blocking or altering communication in order to control the information individuals disseminate to one another.” (Eck & Hatz, 2020).

This study adopts Steven Feldstein's (2021) conceptual framework concerning the targeted persecution of internet users, encompassing a range of coercive measures employed against individuals in the online sphere. Such measures include targeted arrests, physical assaults, legal charges, prolonged detention, and acts of violence specifically directed towards online users.

Examining digital repression by breaking it down into its individual components provides additional valuable perspectives. It is important to note that these three techniques are not necessarily independent of each other; rather, there are instances where they intersect and overlap. Digital surveillance, censorship, and targeted persecution of internet users can overlap in various ways,

leading to a compounded impact on individuals' online experiences. For instance, a government may employ surveillance technologies to monitor individuals' online activities, identify dissenting voices, and gather evidence for potential persecution (Feldstein, 2021). This surveillance can be accompanied by censorship measures that aim to control the flow of information and restrict access to certain online platforms or content. Additionally, targeted persecution may involve the use of surveillance data to identify specific individuals for arrest, physical attacks, or legal charges based on their online activities (Sombatpoonsiri & Luong, 2022). This convergence of surveillance, censorship, and targeted persecution creates a deeply repressive environment, where individuals face constant monitoring, limited freedom of expression, and the risk of direct repercussions for their online engagement.

However, in accordance with the objective of this study, internet regulation and digital repression are distinct concepts with varying objectives, but they can intersect and overlap in certain contexts. Internet regulation encompasses legal frameworks and policies aimed at governing the use and behaviour on the internet, focusing on areas like data privacy, cybersecurity, and intellectual property rights. It seeks to ensure order, protect users' interests, and promote responsible online conduct. On the other hand, digital repression involves the systematic suppression of online activities, often by the head of the state, using tactics like surveillance, censorship, and targeted persecution to control information flow and stifle dissent (Feldstein, 2021). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the dynamics of internet regulation and digital repression underwent significant changes. Governments implemented regulations to address public health concerns, such as content moderation to combat misinformation, and data collection for contact tracing. While these measures were aimed at safeguarding public health, they also presented opportunities for digital repression, with authorities exploiting them to suppress dissent and limit freedom of expression. Thus, the line between internet regulation and digital repression blurred during the pandemic, as some regulatory measures were used as a pretext to suppress opposition and dissenting voices. Hence, keeping that in mind, the terms internet regulation and digital repression will be used synonymously.

In addition to examining the regulation of social media platforms, this thesis recognizes the broader scope of digital repression during public health emergencies. The focus extends beyond social media

to encompass the regulation of the entire digital realm, including surveillance technologies such as tracking apps, data collection practices, and online communication platforms. The study acknowledges that public health emergencies often prompt governments to adopt various surveillance measures, including the deployment of tracking apps to monitor individuals' movements and contact tracing efforts. These surveillance technologies play a crucial role in gathering information related to the spread of the disease and implementing appropriate public health measures. However, there is a potential for these measures to be abused or expanded beyond their intended purpose, leading to increased digital repression.

The theoretical framework of this thesis posits that public health emergency creates conducive conditions for states, in this case, the head of the state and the ministry concerning the regulation of information and communication, to employ digital repression as a mechanism of control, thereby leading to an increase in state-driven online surveillance, censorship, and targeted persecution of internet users. The theory central to this thesis is Opportunistic Repression theory according to which “the repression emerges as a function of state opportunity rather than in response to actual or possible mobilisation against the incumbent.” (Grasse et al., 2021). This theory distinguishes opportunistic repression from preventive and responsive repression by arguing that while preventive repression is sparked by the threat of opposition activity, and responsive repression is the result of deliberate challenges, the latter occurs when the state has access to a wider range of potential repressive activity rather than a shift in the opposition's actions or behaviours, which is what was observed during COVID-19. This theory provides a strong foundation for this thesis to argue how states tend to amplify digital repression during situations of a public health emergency.

The core argument of this thesis is that during a public health emergency, such as COVID-19, the digital repression in democratic states is more likely to increase, using the regulation of misinformation and fake news as a pretext. According to Grasse (2021), state-led repression during situations of public health emergencies tends to increase as the government use the state of emergency as an opportunity to extend their control using regulation of “fake news” as a pretext. The causal mechanism central to this thesis entails the following process:

To begin with, public health emergency, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, arise. Subsequently, a surge in the dissemination of false information pertaining to the pandemic ensues. This could be a result of various factors coming into play. Firstly, the fast expansion and global accessibility of social media platforms which make them a prime environment for the transmission of false and unconfirmed material. Furthermore, sensationalism and conspiracy theories flourish in the climate of fear and uncertainty that the crisis fosters. False narratives can spread and sway public opinion since there are not many reliable fact-checking procedures in place and it's simple to share content. As a result, monitoring the dissemination of correct and trustworthy information during public health emergencies is extremely difficult due to the proliferation of fake news (Rocha et al., 2021). Consequently, it can lead to ambiguity and erode public confidence in reliable information sources including governmental organizations and healthcare facilities. This could result in scepticism, an unwillingness to adhere to advised practices, and noncompliance with public health measures, which would eventually hinder state's attempts to stop the disease's spread (World Health Organization: WHO, 2022). This growing chaos due to the spread of misinformation around the disease necessitates the stakeholder's, in this case, the president and the concerned ministry, increased intervention to tackle the situation and contain the spread of the disease. Therefore, this makes it imperative for the state to regulate and monitor such information to maintain the social order while providing them with an opportunity to intensify their control. To combat and control the proliferation of misinformation, governments implement heightened digital monitoring measures. States use a variety of tactics to plan and control the spread of digital misinformation during public health emergencies. First, governments work along with tech firms and social media platforms to create and implement laws that prohibit the dissemination of incorrect information about public health (Eck & Hatz, 2020). To identify and highlight deceptive content, this may require the use of algorithms and artificial intelligence systems. Governments may also set up legal and regulatory structures to hold people and organizations accountable for disseminating purposeful lies (Eck & Hatz, 2020). Penalties for publishing false information that endangers the public's health and safety could be included in these regulations. In light of such measures, the political actors utilise such situation of emergency as an opportunity to extend their control and stifle the voices of dissent and criticisms. In the process, such regulations and

monitoring by the states results in the rise of digital repression. As, in most cases, these measures are then employed to heighten the surveillance of online content to curb and eliminate criticisms of the authorities by the people. In normal circumstances, the states choose to monitor such content, but they can only do so to a certain extent, especially in democracies. However, in situations of national or global public health emergencies, the states intensify their digital repressive measures as such emergencies provides them with a window through the regulation of fake news and misinformation. This is further explained by the theory at the core of this thesis, the Opportunistic Repression theory, according to which, such conditions of chaos and confusion during a public health crisis give the state an opportunity to intensify digital repression, using the regulation of fake news and misinformation about the disease as a pretext. As a result, rather than being a reaction to real or potential mobilisation against the authority, repression occurs in such instances as a result of state opportunity. (Grasse et al., 2021). Governments now have the ability to arbitrarily flag anything which is unfavourable to them as false, and to criminalise persons who are accused of disseminating "dangerous fake news" as a result of explicit compositions of false content and the projection of horrifying repercussions of pandemic "fake news." (Sombatpoonsiri & Luong, 2022). Any content that criticises or questions the authority and legitimacy of the state can be considered unfavourable by the authorities and can be flagged as a security concern. The term "fake news" refers to the infrastructure-based regulation of information flow and the retaliation against online dissenters. In order to legitimise different draconian measures, governments frequently label the content as "dangerous fake news" in connection with other assertions relating to security and political stability (Sombatpoonsiri & Luong, 2022). By using this, governments can rightfully target "fake news" publishers, develop content filtering systems that are aided by round-the-clock content monitoring, and even completely shut down the Internet (Sombatpoonsiri & Luong, 2022). Hence, this process eventually results in the increase of digital repression.

Therefore, this thesis proposes the following hypothesis:

Situations like public health emergency, give rise to spread of fake news and misinformation which increases state's intervention resulting in a likelihood of amplification of digital repression.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis is qualitative in nature and uses an exploratory in-depth single case study along with process tracing to explore how public health emergencies impact degree of digital repression and to test the hypothesis. The method of process tracing is employed to study the aforementioned impact in depth. Process tracing is a research method that involves tracing the causal chain of events that lead to a particular outcome (Van Evera, 2015). This method is best suited for this thesis as there is a clear causal chain between the independent variable (public health emergency) and the dependent variable (digital repression), as described in the theoretical section of this thesis. The theory at the core of this thesis studies the opportunistic repression as a form of repression that results from a shift in a state's operating environment (Grasse et al., 2021). By focusing on a single case, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of the link between the variables along and the existing contextual factors contributing to the observed amplification of digital repression. Moreover, public health emergencies and digital repression are complex phenomena influenced by multiple factors and actors. Process tracing also aids in disentangling this complexity by providing space to systematically examining the interplay between the variables and identifying the mechanisms driving their relationship. Finally, this thesis contributes to the repression literature. Finally, employing a single case study in combination with process tracing to examine how public health emergencies contribute to the escalation of digital repression under the guise of regulating misinformation, contributes to a nuanced theoretical framework that can be built upon by future researchers. This approach allows for the exploration of this phenomenon in various contexts and domains. Hence, single case study along with process tracing aids in linking the onset of public health emergency with the intensity of digital repression.

This thesis examines the following observables in order to trace the process through the causal mechanisms outlined in the theoretical framework. Firstly, in accordance with the first step in the causal link, in order to match this research with current patterns regarding the public and governmental responses to such public health emergencies, the recent COVID-19 pandemic is examined in order to explore the onset of a public health crisis. Second, to study the dissemination of fake news and misinformation surrounding the pandemic, news articles along with the scholarly

articles and research and a nationwide survey conducted in 2020 by the Communications and Information Ministry and Katadata Insight Center (KIC) will be considered. To analyse the third step of the process which investigates the measures taken by the state and the ministries concerning the regulation of information and communication, also known as Kominfo, to regulate and monitor fake news during the pandemic, along with the scholarly research and news article will be considered. Finally, to evaluate how the state proceeds to intensify its control through digital means using the regulation of fake news as a pretext, annual reports by SAFEnet, Freedom House Index and academic research articles along with online news articles will be studied to provide support to the claims presented in this thesis.

Case Selection

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant global impact, which necessitated a massive global response effort. It is remarkable, nonetheless, that states' responses to this emergency scenario showed both subjectivity and similarities. Various factors, such as regime type, governance capacity, healthcare infrastructure capacity, as well as political and economic interests, can significantly influence a state's approach in addressing such emergencies. The examination of factors influencing a state's response to emergency situations brings forth the significance of regime type as a notable factor. While extant scholarly research has focused on the response patterns of autocratic regimes in such emergencies (Gohdes, 2014; Sajor, 2022; Sombatpoonsiri & Luong, 2022), limited attention has been given to democracies. In order to fill that literature gap, this thesis evaluates the case of Indonesia. Consequently, a comprehensive investigation of Indonesia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic holds substantial academic value and contributes to the existing literature on crisis management within democratic systems. It is also significant as the phenomenal growth of the continent's largest economies in East and South Asia has increased the relevance of Southeast Asia's economic, political, geopolitical, and cultural vitality. This has increased awareness of the area and the expanded role it presently plays in international relations and global economics. In addition, the late 1990s democratic transition in Indonesia following decades of authoritarian rule provides an intriguing setting for studying the contradiction between democratic aspirations and potential civil

rights breaches during public health emergencies. Other democracies in the region, such as India, South Korea, and Taiwan, have more established democratic systems, making Indonesia's case particularly interesting for researching potential tensions and challenges in balancing democratic values and digital repression during public health emergencies. During the transition rule, the country has witnessed the emergence of one of the largest internet user bases. Furthermore, what makes Indonesia a suitable case study for this thesis is that with a population of over 270 million, it ranks as the fourth most populous nation globally (Masduki, 2022). With approximately 212.9 million internet users as of January 2023, accounting for at least 77 percent of the total population. The difficulties that emerging democracies encounter when attempting to control emergencies can be better understood by looking at digital repression in this perspective. Furthermore, Indonesia's government has shown a predisposition for using digital tools to restrict information flow, including by putting policies in place to combat fake news and regulate online content. The government has employed justifications such as "preserving national security" and "ensuring stability" to support the enactment of new and repressive legislation aimed at regulating the digital sphere within the country. Understanding the tactics and effects of digital repression in Indonesia can help advance talks on censorship and government control during public health emergencies.

In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the political actors influencing the causal mechanisms under investigation in this thesis, it is essential to delve into the background of President Joko Widodo, commonly known as Jokowi, who has been in power since 2014. Indonesia, a country with a significant population and cultural diversity, shares similarities with other populous democracies like Brazil, India, and the United States. Widodo, considered a populist leader, distinguishes himself from figures such as Bolsonaro, Modi, and Trump by adopting a technocratic approach (Pepinsky, 2021). His unpretentious demeanour reflects his image as a locally rooted politician who gained power through effective execution of objectives. However, the Jokowi administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic exposed deficiencies in leadership and decision-making, raising concerns about the ability of populist-led democratic governments in diverse societies to effectively handle crises (Pepinsky, 2021). Observers have also criticised the use of state coercive and legal mechanisms to suppress opposition and prioritization of infrastructural

development over democratic consolidation (Masduki, 2022). These actions, justified as protection against harmful rumours and extremism, paradoxically hinder democratic principles.

In addition to President Jokowi, another significant actor driving the mechanism is the Ministry of Information and Communication (Kominfo) of Indonesia. Kominfo of Indonesia played a significant role in managing information and communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, but its actions have been critically evaluated. Concerns have been raised about the extent of control and censorship exercised by Kominfo. One key criticism pertains to the perceived restriction of freedom of expression, as Kominfo monitored and regulated online content, particularly regarding COVID-19 (Sofyani & Oktavianti, 2021). These actions raised concerns about potential censorship and limited space for open dialogue and dissent. Critics argue that such measures stifled legitimate criticism and impeded the free flow of information necessary for public discourse and accountability (Sofyani & Oktavianti, 2021). The evaluation highlights concerns related to freedom of expression, transparency, surveillance, and impartiality.

Data Collection

The thesis makes use of the available research and data to analyse the process. The time period covered by this thesis is from 2019 to 2022. This window of time has been carefully chosen to study the trend of digital repression before the outbreak, throughout the pandemic, and for a while following the pandemic. This time frame is also suitable due to the following reasons. First, the world witnessed the rapid development and uptake of digital technologies and platforms throughout this time. Second, during this period, governments all around the world put in place a variety of controls to tackle the pandemic, including surveillance systems, content restriction, and information management. By focusing on this time period, it is possible to more closely examine the swift policy changes relating to digital repression that occurred amid public health emergencies.

Operationalisation of the variables and the methods to be used to collect data are discussed in Table 1.

Table 1.

<i>Concept</i>	<i>Variables</i>	<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Data Sources</i>
<i>Public Health Emergency</i>	COVID-19 Pandemic	Dissemination of fake news around the disease	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Reports of International Organizations , for examples, Freedom House Index, SAFEnet, 2) Online news articles, for example, Reuters, EngageMedia 3) Journal articles, for example, Dang, 2021, Muzykant et al., 2021
<i>Digital Repression</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Surveillance, 2) Censorship 3) Persecution of internet users 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Online monitoring of content 2) Government's regulation of political content online 3) Legal framework allowing the government to access personal information of internet users 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4) Reports of International Organizations , for examples, Freedom House Index, SAFEnet, 5) Online news articles, for example, Reuters, EngageMedia 6) Journal articles, for example, Dang, 2021, Muzykant et al., 2021 7) Surveys conducted state and non-state actors,

The aforementioned data sources are studied in-depth to understand the causal link between public health emergency and intensification of digital repression using the Opportunistic Repression theory (Grasse et.al., 2021) These sources provide further support to the objective of this thesis and provide with the anticipated outcomes.

ANALYSIS & RESULTS

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the collected data, along with the underlying causal mechanisms, thereby offering substantial evidence in support of the hypothesis proposed in this thesis.

In order to gather and analyse data for this thesis, a single case study process tracing approach was employed. The research process involved gathering data from a variety of sources, including scholarly research, news articles, government documents, and testimonies. These sources provided a comprehensive overview of the measures taken by the government under investigation. Data collection began by conducting a thorough literature review to establish a theoretical foundation and identify key variables. Subsequently, a range of secondary sources were analysed to trace the sequence of events and understand the causal mechanisms at play. The collected data was meticulously analysed identify patterns, correlations, and potential causal relationships. This process allowed for a detailed examination of the impact of public health emergency on the amplification of digital repression under the pretext of regulation of misinformation and fake news.

Following data analysis, the findings are as follows:

According to the theoretical framework and causal mechanisms described in this thesis, the first and second steps of the causal chain indicate that following the occurrence of a public health emergency—in this case, COVID-19—there is a dissemination of false information and fake news about the disease that impedes the steps taken by the head of state to control the spread of the disease. The occurrence of COVID-19 necessitated heightened government intervention which resulted in a shift in the state's operating environment (Grasse et al., 2021). In case of Indonesia, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the heightened consumption of domestic online media, thereby contributing to the dissemination of misinformation and fake news regarding the disease. A comprehensive nationwide survey conducted in 2020 by the Communications and Information Ministry and Katadata Insight Centre (KIC) in Indonesia revealed that a significant percentage of respondents, ranging between 64 and 79 percent, exhibited an inability to discern online

misinformation (Aigbiniode, 2023). The proliferation of misinformation had a significant impact on individuals' behaviour, leading to a tendency to underestimate the severity of the disease and disregard government guidelines. An example of a widely circulated hoax during the early stages of the pandemic was the claim that the virus could not survive in tropical climates due to the high temperatures. This misinformation contributed to a sense of complacency among the public, encouraging them to take greater risks and neglect precautionary measures (Aigbiniode, 2023). The situation was further exacerbated by the controversial statements made by government officials, including the Minister of Health at the time, Terawan Agus Putranto. In February and March 2020, Putranto's statements downplayed the risks posed by the coronavirus, exacerbating the prevailing perception that the disease was not as serious as portrayed (Garjito, 2020). Furthermore, a lot of ubiquitous posts on social media claimed that COVID-19 could be treated by a herbal combination of curcumin, ginger, and other ingredients (Dang, 2021). Additionally, false information about how COVID-19 could be eradicated by alcohol, bananas, hydro chloroquine, and that "People with blood type O are more susceptible to catching the virus" circulated online and spread like wildfire (Muzykant et al., 2021).

This dissemination of false information about the epidemic brings us to the third link in the causal chain. This follows with a discussion of the measures the government has taken to address this problem. The proliferation of fake news and misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the government's intervention, particularly by the president of the state, resulting in the implementation of strict measures to regulate its spread. To address this issue, President Jokowi, along with the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology also known as Kominfo, advanced several measures.

Firstly, they introduced a content moderation policy aimed at tackling misinformation and fake news (Timmerman, 2023). In recent times, Indonesia has become part of a cohort of nations, including Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam, wherein governmental authorities have put forth or implemented stringent cyber laws as legal and bureaucratic measures to restrict the individual rights of its citizens.

Secondly, in response to the pandemic's impact on Indonesia in March 2020, President Jokowi instructed state intelligence bodies to ensure public order and alleviate public fears and panic (Juniarto, 2022). Subsequently, the police took an active role in controlling narratives related to the COVID-19 situation in the country, particularly on social media (Juniarto, 2022). For instance, on April 4, 2020, the National Police Headquarters issued Telegram Letter which contained provisions pertaining to the criminalisation of individuals who spread the misinformation and fake news (Amnesty International, 2021). Thirdly, Kominfo and the Ministry of State-Owned Enterprises (MSOE) also launched an app called 'PeduliLindungi' which aimed at tracking people's exposure to COVID-19 (Rochmah Desyana, 2022). The app utilized Bluetooth technology to detect and record close contacts between users, allowing for efficient contact tracing in case of a positive COVID-19 case. Fourthly, in February 2021, the government rolled out "virtual police" that would patrol online platforms to monitor content posted by citizens, with an intended aim of reducing crime related to the Electronic Information and Transaction (ITE) Law (Florene, 2021). The Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE) Law in Indonesia is a legal framework that regulates electronic transactions, online activities, and internet content. It was enacted in 2008 to address issues related to cybercrime, data protection, and online defamation (Law No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic Information and Transactions, n.d.). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ITE Law was used by the Indonesian government to regulate online content and combat the spread of misinformation and fake news (Mann, 2021). Authorities utilised the law to act against individuals who disseminated false information or engaged in activities deemed to be harmful to public order or national security (Mann, 2021). Lastly, Kominfo also issued MR5/2020, also known as the Government Regulation Number 5 of 2020. The regulation pertains to the implementation of restrictions and other measures to control the spread of COVID-19 ("Indonesia: Suspend, Revise New Internet Regulation," 2021). It outlines guidelines for various aspects, including the enforcement of health protocols, the imposition of restrictions on community activities, the management of public facilities, and the coordination of efforts between central and local government authorities ("Indonesia: Suspend, Revise New Internet Regulation," 2021). The regulation serves as a legal framework for the government's response to the pandemic, aiming to protect public health and ensure the effective management of the COVID-19 situation in Indonesia.

Following the measures taken by the Indonesian government, we proceed to the final step of the causal chain which delves into the intensification of digital repression during public health emergency like pandemic of COVID-19. While the occurrence of COVID-19 resulted in the heightened intervention of the state, specifically the President and the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, it also provided these political actors with an opportunity to utilise the situation at hand and extend their control to strengthen their power in the state. While the measures undertaken by the stakeholders are presented as necessary to contain the disease, they also reflect the dark side of intensification of digital repression under the garb of regulating misinformation and fake news and containing the disease.

Firstly, when talking about the content moderation policy implemented by Kominfo, it has been largely criticised for its insufficient measures in directly addressing misinformation and fake news (Timmerman, 2023). In reality, the regulation primarily focused on content that disrupts public order, which provided limited scope for combatting misinformation. Individuals or government agencies could report problematic content to Indonesia's Ministry of Communication and Informatics, and the ministry may subsequently request the platform to remove false information based on the report (Timmerman, 2023). However, the regulation lacked clear definitions of prohibited content, leaving room for various interpretations and potential misuse, including by the government itself (Timmerman, 2023). This ambiguity raised concerns about the potential infringement upon individuals' freedom of speech and expression. Secondly, referring to the Indonesian government's issuing of a Telegram Letter instructing the police on the handling of individuals deemed as "hoax spreaders." Notably, this measure also encompassed acts of insult directed towards the President and his administration, under the pretext of "maintaining security and order" (Amnesty International, 2021). According to Amnesty International's documentation, within the initial three months following the implementation of this measure, at least 57 individuals were accused of spreading "false news" and insulting the President and his administration in relation to the COVID-19 situation (Amnesty International, 2021). This highlights the government's use of legal measures to address the spread of

misinformation and protect the reputation of the President and his administration, albeit raising concerns about the potential impact on freedom of expression and dissent during the pandemic. Thirdly, the government took advantage of the ITE law and employed it as a tool to silence critics. During the pandemic, this practice increased against common people, activists, and journalists (EngageMedia, 2022). According to Amnesty International (2022) there were 24 accusations filed under the ITE Law's defamation clause in 2012, 84 in 2020, and 91 in 2021. Some of these accusations were in response to complaints over the government's COVID-19 response. For example, the Presidential Chief of Staff accused two Indonesia Corruption Watch researchers of defaming them over a study they did in September 2021. According to the study, several government representatives promoted the use of the medication Ivermectin while the pandemic was ongoing (Juniarto, 2022). Lastly, following this, it is no surprise that the surveillance app launched by the Indonesian government to track people's exposure of COVID-19 breached privacy and security of the citizens (Rochmah Desyana, 2022). Moreover, over 30% of Indonesians, according to a survey by Indonesia's largest media outlet, Kompas (2021), fear the cyber police and believe that it restricts their freedom of expression.

The analysis of the existing data about the case of Indonesia, provides sufficient evidence to support the hypothesis proposed in this thesis. A clear trend of digital repression can be observed wherein, the head of the state along with the concerned increased it digital repressive measures during the public health crisis of COVID-19. While in some instances, the government relaxed its measures post pandemic, in other instances it continues to digitally repress to further its control. Through this, it can be implied that the states tend to use such public health emergency situations as an opportunity to heighten their digital repressive measures during that period using fake news and misinformation as a pretext. It can also be implied that while some governments may get back to their previous, relatively more relaxed measures, others may choose to continue repressing with the same intensity. This decision could be influenced by various factors like regime type, economic and political capacity, diplomatic relations with other states, to name a few.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this thesis focused on the issue of digital repression in Indonesia during COVID-19 and analysed how digital repression worsens during public health emergencies. The work has illuminated the dynamics and ramifications of digital repression during such emergencies through a qualitative method using process tracing and a single case study analysis. Conducting an empirical assessment to ascertain the genuine intentions of stakeholders, such as the president and the relevant ministry, is unfeasible. However, in this study, I have formulated and subjected the proposed hypothesis to empirical scrutiny, aligning with the theoretical premise posited within this thesis.

The results of this thesis show that public health emergencies, like the COVID-19 pandemic, provide fertile ground for the escalation of digital repression because governments frequently take advantage of these situations to expand their control by legitimising the regulation of misinformation and fake news. Digital technologies and surveillance techniques have been used by governments all over the world to increase control, stifle dissent, and restrict citizen rights. The analysis shows how many types of digital repression, such as internet censorship, population monitoring, and targeted persecution of internet users, were used throughout the pandemic to silence dissenting voices, keep tabs on populations, and steer public discourse.

The policy implications of this study are significant. Governments and policymakers need to recognise the potential risks posed by the intensification of digital repression during public health crises. It is crucial to strike a balance between public health measures and safeguarding fundamental rights and freedoms. Efforts should be directed towards establishing clear legal frameworks and guidelines that protect individuals' privacy and freedom of expression in the digital sphere. International organizations, civil society, and human rights advocates play a critical role in monitoring and raising awareness of digital repression during public health emergencies, advocating for transparent and accountable governance regardless of the regime type. Researchers can build upon

this study to further investigate and develop future research on digital repression in the context of public health crises. It is essential to explore the nuances of digital repression across different countries, regions, and cultural contexts. Quantitative and comparative studies can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the variations in strategies, motivations, and consequences of digital repression during public health crises. Moreover, exploring the impact of digital repression on marginalised communities, vulnerable populations, and democratic institutions can provide valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders.

Despite the significant contributions made by this thesis, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The study's reliance on qualitative methods and a single case study analysis may limit the generalisability of the findings. The scope of the research focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, and further studies could explore other emergency situations like natural disasters, terrorism and other public health crises to determine the extent to which the findings can be applied universally. Additionally, the reliance on existing data may introduce potential gaps in the analysis. Future research should consider combining qualitative and quantitative approaches and collecting primary data to enhance the robustness of the findings. Moreover, while this thesis focusses mainly on the factors relating to covid-19 like regulation of misinformation and fake news, digital propensity of the citizens and increased online activity during the lockdown, it does not consider other factors like religious composition, political climate, public compliance and media ownership which could also affect the intensification of digital repression during such emergencies. Future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding by looking into such different factors affecting digital repression in times of public health emergencies.

In conclusion, this thesis has provided a comprehensive evaluation of the intensification of digital repression during public health crises. The evidence gathered through qualitative method, process tracing, and a single case study analysis supports the hypothesis and highlights the concerning implications of digital repression in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The policy implications emphasise the importance of safeguarding individual rights and freedoms while addressing public

health concerns. Researchers can use this study as a foundation for further investigations, exploring different contexts and dimensions of digital repression, and mitigating its negative impacts.

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