Journal of Economy Culture and Society 2022; 66: 203-219 DOI: 10.26650/JECS2021-1028137

Journal of Economy Culture and Society

ISSN: 2602-2656 / E-ISSN: 2645-8772

Research Article

Digital Transnational Dissidence and State Control: A Conceptual Reflection on the Practice and Limits of Digital Transnationalism

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Submitted: 28.11.2021
Revision Requested: 13.03.2022
Last Revision Received: 17.03.2022
Accepted: 24.04.2022
Published Online: 05.10.2022

Citation: Tabak, H., & Beyaz, C. (2022). Digital transnational dissidence and state control: A conceptual reflection on the practice and limits of digital transnationalism. *Journal of Economy Culture and Society*, 66, 203–219. https://doi.org/10.26650/JECS2021-1028137

ABSTRACT

The historical practice of citizen participation in politics was confined to elections, yet in the digital era, increasing digitalisation in everyday life has opened windows of opportunities for alternative civilian participation in the political processes, oppositionary activities being foremost among them. Individual or collective opposition parties thus today also confidently carry out political activities against governmental politics through cyber and digital spaces, and thanks to digital advances, oppositionary political participation can no longer be confined to national borders. Hence, in forms of digital transnationalism and transnational dissidence, irrespective of the connection of the articulator to the target country, people around the world criticise governmental politics and shape public perceptions in one country from abroad. Nevertheless, governments, as well, make use of digital space in taking part in transnational practices in both shaping domestic and international public opinion and challenging overseas or domestic dissident digital transnationalism with an aim to increase its control over the narrative of its politics. This paper elaborates on this paradoxical relationship – the nexus of digital transnationalism, transnational opposition and state control. The paper examines how and why cyberspace turns into a domain for transnational political opposition and, in a related way, examines state endeavours to regulate and govern digital areas as a means of overseeing the digital transnationalism of (trans)local and transnational dissidence groups. Particularly with reference to the latter, the paper deliberates on the limits of digital transnationalism against state control.

Keywords: Digital transnationalism, Transnational dissidence, State control

1. Introduction

Digital advances have facilitated the transnationalisation of everyday practices. Personal mobility is no longer a prerequisite quality for practicing the *transnational*, as the mobility of information already extended transnational space towards digital spaces (Starikov, et al., 2018; Tedeschi et al., 2020; Jauhiainen, Özçürümez, & Tursun, 2021). Confirming Baumanian liquidity in time and space, people worldwide are involved in transnational forms of activities on a daily basis without even leaving their homes, free from fixed territorial constraints (Bauman, 2007; Basch et al., 1994). Upon this, we see that historically mobility-bounded categories such as trans-migrant, diaspora, or kin communities worldwide can now materialise or turn into a form of digital practice without the need for actual movement. As the transnationalism literature has covered, people can practice migrancy or diasporic kinship digitally (Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2020), or those already experiencing mobility can digitally participate in and shape each other's and the home country's daily affairs, as seen in the practices of *digital natives*, *digital immigrants* or *digital diaspora* (Bayne & Ross, 2007; Bayne & Ross, 2011; Ponzanesi, 2020). In tandem with this scholarly scrutiny, there emerges recent literature on the implications of such changes on the government opposition relations (Radsch, 2013; Üstün, 2021) – digital forms of transnationalism have created new avenues for practicing and observing political opposition; the digital space has become a crucial channel for initiating and maintaining transnational opposition thanks to the opportunities provided by communication technologies, including swift access to global political, legal, economic or diasporic domains. Accordingly, extraterritorial political and dissident groups within the diaspora or expat communities are involved in oppositional activities in the home country or assist the local opposition groups in internationalising their voices via digital spaces (Tabak, 2016; 2020a). Equally relevant, local dissident groups, via digital transnational practices, carry their political opposition to extraterritorial spaces and networks. Accounting for all these new realities in government-opposition relations required taking a transnational perspective into account, as opposed to traditional ways of viewing this relationship, which were guided by methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002) and the national outlook (Beck, 2000) that confine the practice of dissidence to national boundaries/categories.

Digital transnationalism and digital transnational dissidence have also had bold consequences for governments. In the current debates on government responses to digital and transnational opposition, the scholarship consistently shows that digital transnationalism and opposition lead primarily to two forms of responses: on one hand states as well make use of the digital space in taking part in transnational practices; digital transnationalism also expedites the states' ability to reach out and mobilise, for instance, diaspora communities (Margheritis, 2007; Chin & Smith, 2015). On the other hand, it increases the volatility on the side of the government and thus leads governments to increase their control over digital and transnational spaces and flow of information through regulatory involvement as a means to strategically deal with opposition (Gainous, Wagner, & Ziegler, 2018). This then would cause setbacks on the side of transnational digital oppositionary involvement, as particularly authoritarian governments may utilise excessive force and increase their misinformative and manipulative digital presence to secure governmental legitimacy against oppositional involvement, as seen, for instance, in the formation of the *digital surveillance state* (Qiang, 2019) or *digital state propaganda* (Cheong, 2020).

This paper elaborates on this paradoxical relationship – the nexus of digital transnationalism, transnational opposition and state control. The nation-state apparently has not retreated against the erosive effects of globalisation, transnationalisation and digitalisation, yet considering digital transnationalism's transformative power in government-opposition relations, it would be misleading to argue that digital transnationalism is overstated. The paper reflects on this puzzling relationship and intends to overcome it by, in particular, identifying the limits of digital transnationalism against state control.

In terms of the organisation of the research, the paper initially introduces the problem and then discusses the consequences of the transnational practices and domain for states and opposition groups. In the following two sections, the paper examines how and why cyberspace turns into a domain for transnational political opposition and the measures states take to control cyberspace and transnational dissidence, respectively. The final chapter deliberates on the limits of digital transnationalism against state control.

2. Digital Transnationalism, Dissidence and Control

Digital advances have provided individuals, families, organisations of various kinds (both governmental and nongovernmental) and corporations worldwide with historically unparalleled opportunities for communicating and influencing each other more directly. Day by day, more people around the world gain access to the internet and the impact people pose to each other increases concomitantly. Peoples' lives and suffering in one part of the world now become part of the lives of others on the other side of the world more often and more swiftly, whether intentionally or unintentionally. An enforced cosmopolitanisation of the everyday lives of people is experienced globally on this very ground, confirming global sociology arguments in this regard (Beck, 2000; Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Delanty, 2009; Beck & Grande, 2010). Thanks to the internet and communication technologies, real and ordinary people in both Western and non-Western everyday contexts are involved in cosmopolitan practices, possibly unintentionally or even latently, thus are constant candidates for turning into "individuals with limited choices in deciding to enter into something larger than their immediate cultures" (Malcomson, 1998, p. 240). Paul Rabinow's definition of the cosmopolitan experience as "an ethos of macro-interdependencies, with an acute consciousness (often forced upon people) of the inescapabilities and particularities of places, characters, historical trajectories, and fates" (Rabinow, 1986, p. 258) becomes empirically overt and unfailing within this very ground. Hence, the internet and communication technologies – together with the other means of globalisation that facilitated the boundless movement of goods, capital, people, culture and ideas (innovations) – rendered territorial borders observably fuzzy and blurred and hence transformed the *containing* and *confining* role of territorial borders. What followed is increasing global minority representations, intensification of international travels and mobility, diffusing borders, ever-strengthening transnational corporations, the growing involvement of ordinary people in transnational initiatives and organisations, increasing global protest movements with vast local resonations –vice versa–, transnationalisation of political opposition, mass transnational news coverage and consumption, transnational mobility of memories and solidarities, etc. (Beck, 2008, p. 27–28). Confirming, to a certain degree, the *hyper globalisation* and the *retreat of the nation-state* arguments popular particularly in the 1990s (Shaw, 1997), and as a grave threat to territorially defined governance systems, all these led to the states' losing control of certain monopolies in political, legal and economic terms, which has increased volatility in their domestic and international affairs.

This volatility is also the reason such a transformation spurred the state to maintain its control on the flow of people, information, ideas and influences, by reinstating the *confining* character of borders surrounding the *homeland*. This confirms the *return of the state* arguments (Barrow, 2005; Delwaide, 2011). Nevertheless, concomitant with the increasing emancipation the internet and communication technologies provided to humanity, states today are keener to seek new opportunities to increase their control over how people communicate and interact, both nationally and cross-nationally. Among the means utilised, *securitisation, legal regulations*, and *political illegalisation* come as the primary responses, in particular, by which states endeavour to tame digital/cyberspace. The governments, accordingly, introduce social media regulations and bills, establish bodies with extended and exceptional authorities for cybersecurity, invent and institutionalise novel representations of cyberspace in which it is treated as contained within the *territorial homeland* (for instance the concept of *cyber homeland* or *cybernation*), illegalise the transnational (and digital) connections that political opposition groups develop and of course deploy *social media trolls* and *official digital campaigns* to demonise transnational opposition practices and increase the legitimacy of efforts to 'thicken' the national borders in the digital space. They thus regulate cyberspace in the guise of protecting the people and the nation from abuse, exploitation, violence and even terrorism.

The quest for increasing control over digital and cyberspace leads to state-centred sustenance of already-digitised everyday life. Nonetheless, the increasing digitalisation in everyday life, at the same time, has opened windows of opportunities for further civilian participation in political processes. The historical practice of citizen participation in politics was confined to elections, yet in the *digital era*, as Gao puts it, information and communication technologies "provide numerous opportunities for state-society communication in the whole policy cycle from policymaking to implementation and evaluation" (Gao, 2020 p. 2-3). In particular, in the evaluation part of the communication, we see that the political opposition as well has become a prime domain in *digital* political participation. Thus, individual or collective opposition parties also carry out their political activities against governmental politics through cyber and digital space. We often see that transnationalisation of political opposition accompanies such a practice and in the forms of digital transnationalism and transnational dissidence, irrespective of the connection of the articulator to the target country, people around the world criticise governmental politics and shape public perceptions in a country from abroad (Pearce, 2014). This represents a cosmopolitan form of political participation (Archibugi & Held, 1995), yet not necessarily a democratic one, and eventually enhances the political opposition in target countries worldwide. Recent examples of such cosmopolitan and transnational digital participation have been seen in protests including the Colour Revolutions, Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring, Gezi Park, Yellow Vests, and Hong Kong Protests. Nonetheless, most of the time, transnational dissidence is maintained by the transnational diaspora communities or governments-in-exile in close collaboration with opposition factions at home, and this leads governments to increase their search for extended control over digital space and transnational activities.

3. The Idea of *Transnationality* – Implications for the State and the Opposition

The *transnational* owes its salience as an analytical mechanism to the scholarly quests for making sense of globalisation. It is thus often thought of as a relatively recent discovery. This may be true of it as an analytical category, as the national-era concepts left no space for mechanisms that could not define and/or make sense of the empirical world nationally. Additionally, the transnational came to the help of the scholarship to explain the beyond-national realities that globalisation brought about. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to think of the transnational as a contemporary, everyday reality, as, as an empirical reality, the *transnational* has always been a constant of life. It was a defining characteristic of the modern world "even in the high days when the nation-state bounded and bundled most social processes" (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002, p. 302). Having said so, it should be borne in mind that this empirical reality, the transnational life and realities, was not something the nation-states have been fond of (unless they benefit from it in controlling power relations in regional and/or international politics). This is because the transnational represented the limits and confines of the authority of the nation-state and the lessening of state control. It was blurring the boundaries of the national and making the national territorial, legal and even societal boundaries permeable. The transnational subjects were the anomalies, making national coherence stigmatised. The fierce hostility and demonisation targeting migrant communities, refugees or transnational capital, mostly led by nationalist political and societal factions, have also been caused by this. The lifeboat ethics of the national gaze were tacitly guiding such a stand. Transnational realities and subjects were thus not only jeopardising the state's effort to stabilise the national category, but also resolving the national qualities. Due to this, the transnational has been a zero-sum subject for the idea of the nation-state.

On the side of the notion of political opposition, in the *national* gaze, the political opposition per se was not something that existentially threatened the national qualities of the state. Opposition groups and blocs were also national realities, obliged to show loyalty and patriotism towards the national categories. At the same time, for certain dissident groups –minority political parties, internationalist political fractions (both socialists and liberals), pan-nationalist structures, governments-in-exile etc. – the national gaze is simply a restraint on their political activities. Equally relevant, the transnational, on the other hand, is the domain of practice for how they maintain their political survival, how they mobilise in the first place, and, relatedly, how they escape from state control. This is the ground, from the perspective of the national condition, the transnational activities of opposition groups can be easily and often described as treachery. The zero-sum dilemma encircling transnational involvements has historically manifested itself within this very scope. The transnational characteristic of an opposition group made it the target of national wrath and made it be seen as the local collaborators of foreign enemies and traitors harming the national unity. Indeed, this has not changed much even today. States still embark on such acts of demonisation despite the transnationalisation they have gone through.

While transnationality predated contemporary globalisation, and thus is not merely an "offspring of globalization" (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002, p. 302), in the meantime, it cannot be denied that globalisation has spread the practice of it globally in an unprecedented way. Today, there is no community worldwide that is exempt from or remains outside of a transnational network, informally and/or formally. Transnationality today defines all sorts of links –mostly technological, social and economic– between *nations*, between *states* and even between *societies* (Beck, 2000, p. 87). This is a kind of development that brought along transnational forms of transformations in nationally organised inter-state relations and domestic politics. In today's world, states are, intentionally or unintentionally, part of various transnational processes, structures and mechanisms, and thus are forced to transnationally deal with the actor and issue constellation in both domestic and international politics. From collaboration with civil society in dealing with refugee crises to public-private partnerships in defence industry and critical infrastructure security, or to transnational regimes of governance, states have become a key contributor and collaborator of transnationally governed domains. The national qualities of the states, accordingly, have been transnationally redefined (Major, 2013). National economies have had to adapt to global economic changes and thus have been reorganised to better collaborate and/or compete with transnational multi-national companies or cross-national production chains. Domestic political domains are now more vulnerable to global interferences, due for instance to the interventionist liberal global agenda in terms of human rights, economic policies or state-society relations. Global governance regimes, as a product of collaboration among international, supranational and transnational global organisations, develop novel tools and means for shaping the normative standards of individual states. As seen in the UN system, the bulk of organisations first mainstream certain agendas and later impose and even dictate them on governments through diplomatic, economic and even legal means. In doing so, they even collaborate with local nongovernmental sectors, including opposition groups, for instance, as seen in the shadow report practices in terms of the global gender regime (Tabak et al., 2022; Tabak & Doğan, 2022).

Nevertheless, dissident groups may benefit from such a transnationalisation practice, and in fact, they do. Transnational qualities of opposition groups have flourished prominently. Together with digital and internet technologies, opposition and other transnational groups more swiftly access global political, legal, economic or diasporic domains. Yet, the other side of the coin shows that the transnationalisation of the nation-state also resulted in better control of the transnational domain by the state through state transnationalism. In the historical context, state control lacked the transnational tools and means of involvement; recently the state's governing capacity has increased in an unprecedented way. As seen in recent globe-spanning state efforts to controlling the digital space through regulations and bills, which we will touch upon in detail soon, the transnational continues to evoke a zero-sum relationship for the nation-state. The state, with tools better suited to transnational realities, endeavours to control the transnational domain and action, as seen in the attempts for control of digital space, targeting the digital transnationalism of political dissidence.

4. Cyberspace and Transnational Dissidence – on Digital Transnationalism

Despite the robust effects of transnational realities on states and the state's system, the transnational space is something still in the making, and digital/cyberspace's paving the way for transnationalising the everyday life of people worldwide has proven this – the boundaries of the transnational space are now extended to the digital domains (Tedeschi et al., 2020). As a practice of globalisation from below, people worldwide are involved in transnational forms of activities on a daily basis without even leaving their homes, thus, through living liquid lives free from fixed territorial constraints (Bauman, 2007). Thus, the personal mobility component of the *transnational* has today lost its prerequisite qualities – the mobility of information alone suffices for practising the *transnational*. Concomitantly, the nongovernmental sector –both national civil societies and transnational communities– can easily counter state transnationalism through digital (virtual) transnationalism (Starikov, et al., 2018; Jauhiainen, Özçürümez, & Tursun, 2021). Digital transnationalism enables the nongovernmental sector, including opposition and dissident groups, to bypass state control and conduct its activities away from the government's watch. Therefore, although the territorial determinants of transnational activities continue to remain intact and personal mobility remains a primary means for transnational mobilisation, the transnational space has been extending towards cyber and digital space. Technological advances and transnational space thus enrich each other. Accordingly, while the transnational movement of information is the defining component of the digital space, the digital space further facilitates the extension of transnational involvements towards the everyday life of people worldwide – social media being the engine for such a *dependency*.

In the historical context, no doubt the traditional media, as well, opened spaces for transnational involvement –transnational news coverage was key for people to experience the life of others beyond national borders. Yet, the most restraining part of this media was that it was evoking one-sided communication. The receiver community of a transnational story did not have the instruments to turn this into a dialogue. It was the internet technologies developed from the 1990s onwards that rendered a transnational dialogue possible. The digital communication networks, online forums, electronic mail platforms and online search engines, etc. all increased boundary permeability in favour of the flow of information and influences, thus facilitating virtual border-crossing for communities worldwide (Shields, 2014). There have even been transnational virtual communities that have formed (Broughton, 2011). Moreover, with smartphones and mobile devices with an internet connection, *news* production has cascaded towards non-institutional and informal domains. In a more inclusive framework, along conventional media companies' global spread, average internet users worldwide have come to be able to report on their surroundings and even on distant places. They furthermore easily become a participant of or contributor to national, global and transnational agendas globally, thanks to *social media* (Seo, et al., 2009, p. 123–126; Christensen, 2013; Gomes, 2018; Andersson, 2019; Dekker & Engbersen, 2013; Plaza & Below, 2014). Proving this right, *We Are Social*'s global digital overview report 'Digital 2020' suggests "more than 4.5 billion people now use the internet, while social media users have passed the 3.8 billion mark. Nearly 60 percent of the world's population is already online, and the latest trends suggest that more than half of the world's total population will use social media by the middle of this year [2020]" (Digital 2020 Global Overview Report).

At this juncture, social media functions as a medium where political campaigns are carried out or social and mass movements are organised, a feature that opposition groups highly benefit from and exploit (Bennett, 2004; Gainous, et al., 2018; Gao, 2020, p. 2–3). Considering that governments, particularly the populist and authoritarian ones, often leave less and less space for dissident voices in conventional media, cyber and digital space (social media) stands out as an invaluable asset for opposition elements in moulding public opinion. In this way, government control on the conventional media becomes rendered ineffective, as opposition groups direct their criticism to government policies and are heard by the public more swiftly and directly, and at no cost. The opportunities for gaining supporters despite government control on media encourage more dissident groups to mobilise online tools and channels to provide a means of political socialisation and mobilisation to the broader public, youth being at the epicentre of such activities. And, indeed online tools have already proven their validity with regard to increasing political engagement of particularly the youth and young adults (Ødegård & Berglund, 2008; Keating & Melis, 2017). Thus, opposition groups greatly invest in making their views visible and dominant in cyber and digital space through news sites, social media applications, search engines, blogs, forums and sophisticated and at the same time *easy-to-share* audio and visual media contents.

Opposition groups, within this scope, also perform a vital task, tackling fake news and misinformation – much-needed work in the post-truth era in dealing with populist governments. Accordingly, concomitant with the increasing role of social media in political mobilisation, in addition to opposition groups, governments also utilise virtual communication and state resources to increase governmental presence and consolidate their power and control in cyber and digital space. They want to control information and the way it is framed; hence, they seek to be the dominant source in informing, influencing, directing and *thus manipulating* their citizens and world public opinion. Accordingly, to do so, we often see the utilisation of fake news and misinformation at the hands of governments. Opposition groups here serve in the critical task of fact-checking – they inform domestic and international public opinion regarding the validity of governmental coverage of developments and actual happenings (Coddington, et al., 2014; Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Lewandowsky, et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018). Local opposition groups are not alone in this fact-checking business – there are international fact-checking networks *transnationally* contributing to making governments more transparent in their actions. These networks also collaborate with local dissidents and enable them to enter transnational domains as agents with valid political voices (The International Fact-Checking Network, 2015).

Digital transnational opposition involves more than international fact-checking. It evokes direct participation in politics in a locality. It may manifest itself in various forms. In the Arab world, for instance, we may talk about a transnational regional network of opposition cooperation that has had a bold impact on the Arab Spring protests (Kraetzschmar, 2011; Tabak, 2020b). The networks of transnational collaboration, forged by like-minded local civil society organisations, political parties and other informal protest groups and activists in the Arab world, initiated opposition cooperation on certain issues including reforms, election alliances or parliamentary politics. They also were involved in public mobilisation in the forms of grassroots coalitions and pro-democracy activism, and the effective use of social media by these networks of opposition coalition proved itself to be a game-changer during popular uprisings in the Arab world (Howard, et al., 2011; Sumiala & Korpiola, 2017). Indeed, the global popular support delivered via social media further strengthened the hands of the protestors on the ground. This leads us to the imperative role transnational solidarity networks play in the mobilisation of opposition worldwide – regarding both local and global agendas. For the former, people worldwide provided vast support to protestors via social media in the case, for instance, of the Colour Revolutions, Occupy Wall Street protests, Gezi Park protests, Yellow Vests and more recently, the Hong Kong protests. The human rights abuses governments committed when suppressing these protests were publicised through the digital circulation of images. Global public opinion was mobilised to put pressure on the governments. The same has been the case regarding global agendas. On issues such as nuclear power, climate change, violence against women, anti-racism, pollution, deforestation, whale hunting, corruption, austerity or education cuts and tax reforms, or blasphemy, transnational solidarity networks initiate virtual protest campaigns along with on-the-ground campaigns (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011; Sreberny, 2015; Ciszek, 2016; Baer, 2016; Mutsvairo, 2016; Kaun & Uldam, 2018). A final example of transnational digital oppositionary involvement would be those of the diasporic communities, a.k.a. digital diaspora. Political dissidents in exile from certain countries pursue political activism through digital communication technologies, thus involving themselves in the domestic politics of their *homelands* and endeavouring to build external pressure on the governments in their home countries by shaping the perceptions of the international audience. Among many others, the Israeli, Iranian, Uzbek, Russian, Chinese, Turkish, Burmese, Syrian, and Egyptian dissident diasporic communities have long pursued digital transnational opposition (Kendzior, 2011; Chen, 2016; Michaelsen, 2018; Varea, et al., 2018; Al-Rawi & Fahmy, 2018).

As the above section explicates, the digital space has become a crucial channel for initiating and maintaining transnational opposition. This has had bold consequences for governments, leading them to increase their control over digital space. The next section deals with the state response to digital transnationalism.

5. The Cyberspace and State Control

Digital space's enabling of dissident groups to maintain a political fight far away from the territorial (thus legal) reach of the governments increases the political volatility of governments. In return, it urges governments to take measures to maintain control on the digital (thus the transnational) flow of information, ideas and influences. Governmental involvement in this regard – including huge political, legal and economic influence the states pose on the digital space and the increase in governmental appearance on it– confirm the *return of the state* arguments (Barrow, 2005; Delwaide, 2011). States are better adapted to globalisation today, and thus have learnt how to *deal with* the emancipation the internet and communication technologies provided to humanity. We will reflect on the extent and limits of this adaptation and control in the next section (with a particular reference to the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the realities it brought), yet for now, we will reflect on how states respond to the challenges of digital transnational and transnational dissidence.

Defining the digital space as anarchic, insecure, and unreliable comes forth as the prime mechanism for states striving to keep cyberspace under control. Accordingly, governments often associate digital space with fraud, deception and abuse, while underlining their duty to keep citizens safe from abuse and malpractice originating from such spaces. They thus frame their digital involvement as something that favours their citizens. There is no doubt, as an existential criterion, that one of the most important priorities of the state is to protect their citizens. Considering that more than 500 million computers have been exposed to the negative effects of software and viruses (web spoofing, DDoS, botnets, Trojans, cybercrime, cyber-attack, privacy protection etc.) via the internet in recent years and that the cost of this damage to national economies on a global scale is equivalent to at least $110 billion, their interest in securing the digital space proves well-founded (World Internet Development Report, 2019, p. 89). Moreover, there are also great risks, such as deciphering and seizing critical information and violating confidentiality. Therefore, in recent years, many countries have begun to make their national cybersecurity strategies functional in legal terms and as part of their broader national security, within the scope of which they strive both to increase their control and to overcome the actual threats that the anarchic structure of the digital space pose.

The United States of America stands out as the country that started the first initiatives in terms of cyberspace security. Accordingly, during the Obama and Trump administrations, the Cybersecurity National Action Plan – United States Cyber Incident Coordination, Strategic Principles for Securing the Internet of Things, Guide for Cybersecurity Event Recovery and A Framework for a Vulnerability Disclosure Program for Online Systems – was launched. Almost $2 billion was appropriated to the National Protection and Programs Directorate (of the United States Department of Homeland), an institution in charge of cybersecurity and critical infrastructure administration (World Internet Development Report, 2019, p. 108). China announced its National Cyberspace Security Strategy and International Strategy of Cooperation on Cyberspace in December 2016 and March 2017. Cybersecurity Law, the first basic law to regulate China's cybersecurity management, entered into force in June 2017. Russia built its cybersecurity on the Information Security Doctrine published in 2000. The doctrine has functioned so far as a basis for shaping government policy on information security, for preparing suggestions to improve the legal, procedural and organisational framework, for ensuring information security and for devising targeted national information security programs. The concept of *sovereign internet* has been developed accordingly to build a legal and institutional ground for making sovereignty more sensible digitally. In this system, internet traffic on the Russian web would be widely controlled. Germany, on the other hand, released a program called Cyber Security Strategy in November 2016 and concomitantly has passed an act targeting social network platforms like Facebook and Twitter. The fines aimed to eliminate expressions of hatred and slander (World Internet Development Report, 2019, p. 109). Singapore also launched its Cyber Security Strategy in October 2016 intending to build a resilient cyber infrastructure, creating safer cyberspace, developing a vibrant cybersecurity ecosystem and strengthening international partnerships in this context. The Singaporean government also established a cybersecurity laboratory at the National University of Singapore in March 2017 to support cybersecurity research and testing by academic and industrial staff (World Internet Development Report, 2019, p. 107). Lastly, following suit, Turkey also published a comprehensive plan for national cybersecurity in 2016 (the National Cyber Security Strategy 2016-2019). The plan was followed in 2020 by the entrance into force of an internet broadcast law for regulating internet broadcasts and for preventing crimes committed through internet broadcasts. In Turkey, the concept of the *cyber homeland* was developed in order to show the necessity of the comprehensive institutional presence of the state within cyberspace. Several other states, such as Ukraine, Australia, Japan, India and Afghanistan, implemented similar measures related to cyberspace (Lu & Liu, 2018).

In addition to these measures, some states also endeavour for their citizens to be more secure and under control in cyberspace through their private institutions. Among these states, Japan established a unit called the Office of Cyber Security Policy in 2016 under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2016, the Australian government initiated the Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre for making its cyberspace capacity particularly effective at combatting financial crimes. The British government established a unit called the National Cyber Security Centre in 2017 to respond to cybersecurity incidents and to secure public and private sector networks. Also in 2017, India established its national cybersecurity unit: the Indian National Cyber Security Coordination Centre. It is the highest cyberspace intelligence agency in the country. In addition, the Indian Government established in March 2017 the Cyber Swachhta Kendra to create secure cyberspace, to detect botnet infections in India and to notify and enable cleaning and securing systems of end-users from further *infections* (World Internet Development Report, 2019, p. 107).

The state response to digital developments is explicated above. The question of the implications of increasing state involvement in cyberspace for state-society relations, and thus for transnational dissidence, remains partly addressed. The bills and regulations governments introduced regarding the internet are no doubt necessary for and deployed in fighting cybercrime. Yet the regulations also allow governments an immense say in how the internet can be used by ordinary people. Governments can cut internet connections country-wide or partly in case of an *emergency*, emergency being defined by the governments. They can filter and watch all traffic and block any content that seems inappropriate from the governmental perspective, paving the way for increased censorship throughout the country. Practically, this legal and political capacity for censoring any content means that governments control the flow of information. In addition to this, governments also enjoy the capacity to define real and fake news, and through the legal instruments they have developed, they outlaw the production and spread of false information. Considering that opposition voices are often cherished globally, they concomitantly find themselves the target of criminalisation due to their production and circulation of *false* information. An increasing number of legal cases targeting opposition groups for *disrespect of authorities* is also another consequence of such (il)legalisation (Moyakine & Tabachnik, 2021). Legal grounds are not yet always necessary in the governments' digital dealings with opposition groups. In the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, a dissident journalist in exile, at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, for instance, Khashoggi's communications and movements, along with several other Saudi human rights defenders in exile, were monitored via internet-based surveillance technologies (spyware) operated from Saudi Arabia (Michaelsen, 2020).

In summary, "digital technologies have given authoritarian governments new tools to control, silence, and punish dissent across borders" (Michaelsen, 2020). They tame transnational and national political opposition through *securitising, legally regulating,* and *politically illegalising* digital practices. Governments thus introduce internet regulations, establish bodies with extended and exceptional authorities for cybersecurity, redefine cyberspace as a cyber-homeland (thus legitimising their sovereignty over it), and illegalise political opposition. In some cases, governments even deploy illegal means for controlling the opposition.

6. State Control and the Limits of Digital Transnationalism

The fact that a great portion of the world's population has internet access and that traditional communication systems have shifted towards virtual communication in many areas has attracted the attention of not only governments but also opposition elements. We can see that governments inform, influence, manipulate and direct their citizens and world public opinion by using social media, along with mass media, effectively, just as do the opposition elements. Yet, unlike the opposition elements, the legal and political privileges of the governments allow them to increase and even consolidate their power and control in the cyber and digital field day by day. Moreover, the opportunities the internet provides the opposition with in reaching the target audience both nationally and transnationally motivate governments to search for ways of further consolidating their control on the digital space and equally for silencing and defaming opposition views. Nevertheless, opposition and dissident voices have successfully employed the internet in shaping the national political scope – the transnational mobilisation that dissident groups have initiated has become consequential in several cases. There is no doubt, opposition groups have profoundly benefitted from digital transnationalism. Global connectedness and transnational civil society and activism have contributed to optimism on the opposition regarding the facilitative role globalisation and concomitant digital revolution can bring about. Transnational governance mechanisms that enabled the worldwide nongovernmental sector to participate in global processes and global neoliberal common sense favouring interventionism where human rights issues and democracy are concerned have both empowered opposition groups. Digital advances have furthered the mobilisation and participation capabilities of opposition groups globally. Opposition groups have become collaborators with international organisations in democracy and human rights watch missions. They have enabled the international community to hear about the human rights abuses that national governments commit. As seen in mass public protests, the opposition has made use of the internet and social media very well so that revolutionary popular changes became possible to initiate. However, digital transnationalism has some limits in bringing about a revolutionary change in state power, emanating from an ontological relationship between the internet and the state. The recent *return-of-the-state* (states' recovering their control in cyberspace) arguments have very well established this.

The argument is that digital space and electronic connectivity existentially depend on physical infrastructure established in sovereign territories and are regulated under legal jurisdictions – it is thus not a de-territorialised structure. And, other than limiting the sovereignty of states, they offered novel forms of control into the service of the nation-states. Therefore, “cyberspace has evolved in ways that fit remarkably well onto the map of Westphalian sovereign states”, as governments have utilised cyberspace for their own strategic advantage rather than as an authority circumscribing element (Mainwaring, 2020, p. 217). “Rather than signalling the decline of the importance of Westphalian States,” therefore, cyberspace “has enabled sovereign power to evolve, creating new means of governance and reinforcing centralised power and authority in significant ways.” Governments have shown no hesitation in exploiting the cyberspace in their own gains (Mainwaring, 2020, p. 218). The *retreat of the nation-state* arguments, within this scope, emanated from the idea that the internet revolution was initially, from a libertarian perspective, considered a development extending individual freedoms beyond state sovereignty and a development eroding the prominence of the state in the globalising world. Cyberspace was thus thought of as a realm out of government authority and boundaries remained weak or even non-existent. It was within this scope that the internet, particularly in the 1990s, was thought of as something that would give rise to democracy and human rights globally. This emancipatory image of cyberspace, as the contemporary *return-of-the-state* approaches argue, was no doubt a misconception and *blind optimism*; it was even “deliberately promoted by states in order to distract from the reality” (Mainwaring, 2020, p. 215). Here, citizen and public cynicism, as factors encouraging states to disregard the cries against increasing state control in the digital space, also need to be addressed as a limiting factor in the practice and robustness of transnational opposition (see Song et al., 2020).

The ontological relationship between the internet and the state, along with increasing state capacity in securing and regulating the digital space, therefore led digital transnationalism to remain limited in effect, as state control has not been solely consolidated on the digital space. The transnational domain has also experienced an extended state presence and control. States make good use of and are well adapted to both transnational and digital spaces. The Covid-19 pandemic has stood out as another process proving that governments maintain a tight control over both transnational and digital processes. This was despite the easy access the digitalised terrain of global politics provided to the public worldwide, allowing them to learn about other countries’ public health experiences and management during the pandemic (techno-optimism). The territorial state borders were raised more powerfully against the free movement of people and goods during this period. Moreover, the state presence on the internet has become more and more prominent. Digitalised public health tracking systems gave easy access to the private life of citizens. Governments, also through the digital space, misinformed both the national and global public regarding their performance in dealing with the pandemic. The public health risks became a ground upon which digital and privacy rights of citizens were easily violated, and critiques of the way governments dealt with the pandemic were silenced. Digital authoritarianism, as a misuse of power, became a concern within this very scope (Nitsche, 2020).

7. Conclusion

Digital transnationalism represents a novel phase in the cosmopolitanisation of the everyday lives of ordinary people worldwide. Digital technologies equipped people with opportunities to be involved in transnational practices without even leaving their homes. This has served well in the transnationalisation of political opposition. Political opposition groups worldwide made use of the digital advance in making their point politically legitimate and in participating in global processes by which their governments become restrained by global governance mechanisms. Indeed, this has increased volatility in states’ domestic and international affairs, thus spurring states to seek ways to gain back control over such transnational practices. This is a critical juncture in discussing the nexus of digital transnationalism, transnational opposition and state control. This is because, while increasing digital transnationalism and transnational opposition created a libertarian optimism for weakening state control, in reality, the state never ceded ground or moved toward limited involvement in the digital space. Rather it has developed the means to be more directly and existentially involved in it. Therefore, in order to increase their control over digital space and on digital transnational opposition, states have effectively utilised legal, political and strategic means. The impact of this is evident in the legal and political capacity states enjoyed in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Digital transnationalism is not overrated; it has been consequential for states and other forms of governance in global politics. Yet, despite the increasing digitalisation in everyday life and the opportunities for further civilian participation in transnational political processes, one can hardly be optimistic about the future of digital transnationalism as a practice that alters governmental dominance in political life. State control will seemingly continue to increase as the material dimension of the digital space continues to be ruled by governments and bounded by the territorial confines of countries. This is something that also jeopardises the future of transnational governance (and democracy), as increasing state presence and control over the digital space come to mean a weaker transnational oppositional presence in it. Thus, the transnational, whether digital or not, continues to be a zero-sum subject for governments, yet this time also for the opposition groups.

Ethics Committee Approval: In order to write our article, it is not necessary to get permission from any Ethics Committee. Otherwise, we declare that we accept any legal responsibility that may arise and that the information we have given above is correct.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Author Contributions: Conception/Design of Study- H.T., C.B.; Data Acquisition- C.B., H.T.; Data Analysis/Interpretation- H.T., C.B.; Drafting Manuscript- C.B., H.T.; Critical Revision of Manuscript- H.T., C.B.; Final Approval and Accountability- C.B., H.T.

Conflict of Interest: The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

Grant Support: The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

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