

Digital Hegemony and the Russia-Ukraine War

Dijital Hegemonya ve Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı

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**Sorumlu yazar/
Corresponding author:**
İlknur Şebnem Öztemel

ORCID: 0000-0002-8829-7800

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İlknur Şebnem ÖZTEMEL²

ABSTRACT

In this article, the impacts of US-based global hi-tech companies like Google or Starlink on the Russia and Ukraine War will be examined. Also, grounding from this sample, further projections about the traditional debate on MNCs (Multinational Companies) vs. state will be made. Since the US Presidential Elections in 2008 and Occupy Wall Street Movements, social media and the internet have started to be used for political purposes. With the start of the Arab Spring events, the sphere of influence of such politically oriented movements on the internet became international. Then, with the Second Karabakh War (The 44 Days War), social media, the internet, and misinformation started to be used directly for foreign policy interests. Additionally, it can be argued that the use of social media, digital platforms, and the internet for specific foreign policy objectives entered a mature phase with the imposition of technological and cultural sanctions against the Russian people, while the well-known hi-tech and communication sector voluntarily makes its services easier to use for Ukrainian authorities and the Ukrainian people. Here, it is possible to see significant changes in the traditionally defended apolitical structures of global companies. Considering the increasing importance of hi-tech goods in our daily lives, sampling from the habits we got during the Covid-19 pandemic, the importance and effect of the companies that provide these products and services will also rise. Adding the lack of home-grown alternatives for these products and know-how transfer,

² Yüksek Lisans Öğrencisi, Hacettepe Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi Anabilim Dalı, Ankara, Türkiye, ilknuroztemel14@gmail.com

this one-sided dependency could bring weaknesses for several nation-states in the upcoming period.

Keywords: The internet, social media, Russia-Ukraine War, technology firms, dependency

ÖZ

Bu makalede, ABD merkezli, Google veya Starlink gibi teknoloji şirketlerinin Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı üzerindeki etkisi incelenecektir. Ayrıca, bu örnekten yola çıkarak, çok uluslu şirketler ile devletler arasındaki rekabetin artacağına dair geleneksel tartışmalar çerçevesinde belirli öngörülerde bulunulacaktır. 2008 yılında yapılan ABD Başkanlık Seçimleri ve Wall Street'i İşgal Et Hareketinden bu yana sosyal medya ve internet, politik amaçlar dâhilinde kullanılmaktadır. Arap Baharı olaylarının başlamasıyla ise, bu olgu daha geniş bir kitleye erişmiş ve uluslararası nitelik kazanmıştır. Ardından, İkinci Karabağ Savaşı (44 Gün Savaşı) ile sosyal medya, internet ve hatta dezenformasyon, alenen dış politika aracı olarak kullanılmıştır. Bunlara ek olarak, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı'nda, ilgili teknolojiler ekstra kolaylıklarla, Ukrayna makamlarının ve Ukraynalıların hizmetine sunulurken, Rus halkını hedef alan teknoloji temelli kültürel ambargolar ile sosyal medya ve internetin, propaganda ve iletişim temelli bir şekilde, belirli dış politika hedefleri için kullanması yönündeki eğilimin, olgunluk dönemine girdiği söylenebilir. Burada küresel şirketlerin geleneksel olarak savunulan apolitik yapılarında önemli değişimler görmek mümkündür. Covid-19 pandemisi ve karantina döneminde kazandığımız alışkanlıkları da düşünecek olursak, ilgili teknolojilerin günlük hayatımızdaki öneminin artması ile, bahse konu girişimlerin ve şirketlerin de önemi ve etkisi artacaktır. Bu noktada, pek çok ülkenin yerli alternatifler sunmaktan aciz olması ya da teknoloji transferi noktasında zafiyetinin olması neticesinde gelişen tek taraflı bağımlılık, ilerleyen dönemde ulus-devletleri zorlayabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İnternet, sosyal medya, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı, teknoloji şirketleri, bağımlılık

Introduction

In this century, there is an internationally widespread trend as everyone knows something about any subject, but it cannot be counted as 100% true and deeply analyzed information. It is undeniable that social media, digital platforms, and easy access to data via the internet are effective in this situation. Rich sources on the internet led people also to be informed about political facts briefly. At some point, the lack of heavy burdens and costs of revealing their thoughts on online platforms, even by using nicknames, increased people's tendency to be more active in the political sphere.



This led to the development of political usage of the internet, social media, and digital platforms both on the civil and commercial/professional sides to steer people. Since the US Presidential Elections in 2008 and Occupy Wall Street Movements, social media and the internet started to be used for political purposes. With the start of the Arab Spring events, the sphere of influence of such politically oriented movements on the internet became international. Then, with the Second Karabakh War (The 44 Days War), social media, the internet, and misinformation started to be used directly for foreign policy interests. What's more, it can be asserted that the use of social media, digital platforms, and the internet for specific foreign policy objectives entered a mature phase with the imposition of technological and cultural sanctions against the Russian people, while the well-known hi-tech and communication sector voluntarily makes its services easier to use for Ukrainian authorities and the Ukrainian people.

It is undeniable that most goods and services like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Youtube are American-based enterprises with millions of foreign users. The stranger nature of these companies make it impossible to have accountability on the side of nation-states regarding the force of legal jurisdiction. Regardless of the losses of taxes, as these companies earn money from the users they have in countries like Türkiye or Russia, governments cannot win from this. Their position as news resources or gatekeepers makes these companies more important yet harder to control. Adding crisis of fake news or the rising number of bot accounts that affect domestic and international public opinion, it has become obligatory to have an eye on the activities of these companies. The example of sanctions imposed on Russia shows that there is a digital hegemony that does not empower freedom of speech or enhance the lives of regular people but is used as a weapon.

It is well-known that technology has developed faster in the last decades and has started to interfere in any sphere of our daily lives. Besides, the Covid-19 pandemic and long periods of quarantine further accelerated digitalization and brought more interference of technology into our lives. All these changes have both positive and negative results. It is for sure that technology makes our lives more efficient and easy. On the other hand, some scholars like Baudrillard or Adorno claimed that such a close relationship with technology would irreversibly change the nature of the relations between man and machine and the future of humanity. As Kalin argues, technological devices and machinery produced to shape nature started to shape the social life of individuals (2018, pp. 119-120). In this respect, Marshall McLuhan suggests technological determinism, which orders that the central issue in life is technology, and all other things are being shaped by it (Timisi, 2016, p. 18). In this sense, İsmet Özel (2017) describes modern life as "A man besieged by a man-made nature". Additionally, there is another problem: anything provided by the technology is presented as a good thing without any deeper analysis. Postman sees this situation as another serious problem and calls it 'technopoly' (Newport, 2019, pp. 62-63).

Regardless of the position of technology in our lives, another problem pops into our mind, especially during extreme conditions like the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War. Inspiring from the view of Postman, the huge impact of technology in our lives and the technological superiority and hegemony enjoyed by a certain actor/group of actors could be more detrimental and risky for regular people. At this point, the importance of perception management in politics must be recalled. Two crucial points must be referred to. First, it is well understood that in diplomatic communications, using digital platforms and creating a positive perception about oneself in the minds of the international community became an important necessity in this post-truth age. Secondly, the open and un-monitored nature of social media and digital platforms, which constitutes the core of global communication in this century, has led to the spread of fake news and misinformation and created a fertile flora for using them for specific, hostile foreign policy interests.

What's new for this war is, for the first time, usually neutral companies that provide hi-tech or social media services become a clear side of the fight by making global social media or digital platforms unavailable for the Russian side, preventing them from presenting an alternative narrative of the war and voluntarily gave up making their Russian consumers happy, to help to their home governments to create pressure over Kremlin. Now at first, it must be underlined that, for a long time, the dominance of GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft) in the markets and their gatekeeper position in terms of access to information and news were seen as a threat for some people. These companies became available to be used against the interests of their foreign consumers and propose open threats against the solidarity of nations. Several actors like the EU imposed Digital Markets and Digital Services Acts (DMA & DSA) to control the power of these firms with both economic and social worries. The Turkish government has also prepared a draft law regulating the actions of these companies and some other giants, which foresees more transparent operation and increases their responsibility for any negative development like the spread of fake news, black propaganda, or volatility among the public. All these acts can be interpreted as necessary measures taken by governments to achieve full security against hybrid threats.

Rising Influence of the Internet and Social Media on Politics

At first, the internet and social media (Web 2.0) were used solely by civil individuals rather than public institutions or commercial media broadcasters. In this respect, the spread of social media was appreciated and seen as a gift that would bring back the supposed nature of media to constitute 'the fourth power of democracy', enhance freedom of expression, and support people's right to gain informa-



tion. For example, Rheingold claimed that people could meet and talk about social problems online, and such platforms could constitute an alternative meeting place, an agora for people (1993, p. 149). Such claims appetize people for ancient tradition of the agora, direct democracy, or cyber democracy that would be enhanced with the transparency and participation possible with the new technologies (Şener, 2006, p. 64). In time, the spread of such applications led to the creation of an alternative public sphere. Habermas conceptualizes the public sphere as a mediating space between the state and civil society. It is presented as a basic sample of a democratic space where public interests, opinions, agendas, and problems are transformed and exchanged by citizens. However, critical rationality, equality, freedom of expression, and dissemination are the necessary conditions for the proper functioning of the public sphere (Habermas, 1991, pp. 398-405).

On the other side of the coin, some scholars like Yusuf Kaplan argued that with the rise of interactions between capitalist production methods and new communication technologies, local cultures would be materialized, added to the sphere of global power and under a sole global culture. Thus, monitoring and controlling the world for certain actors became easier. It is asserted that establishing a more democratic structure via these technologies is just a fantasy (Kaplan, 1991, p. 141). Unfortunately, recalling the problems with algorithms of such platforms that led to the further polarization of the public and scandals that occurred in the last 4-5 years, it can be said that rather than making the global arena more democratic, these platforms were used as aggressive tools for certain foreign policy goals.

The first official and well-known usage of social media for political means was seen in Barack Obama's campaign for the US Presidential Elections in 2008. Other than the traditional way of top-down, one-way interaction with people held via TV, published articles or websites, Obama's team used social networking systems (SNSs) such as Facebook to involve users in two-way interactions and introduced 'micro-payments' via social media apps. Also, the team established personalized environments (e.g. 'my.barackobama.com') that would lead to empowering the sense of participation and ownership in the campaign (Gliem & Janack, 2008, pp. 45-47; Orłowski, 2020).

The second mass usage of social media for political goals was also in 2008. This time, people used social media applications in order to mobilize for a bottom-up process, Occupy Wall Street protest (Gleason, 2018, pp. 76-77). This civil disobedience movement that highlights economic inequalities in the USA has shown that old theories of Henry D. Thoreau were resurrected via technological gadgets. A very significant nuance here is that, as technology makes the mobilization process easier, faster, and cheaper, it has become a more common and normal thing to organize protests all over the World.

Thirdly, with the spread of Arab Spring protests via social media, the usage of such innovations for political means became an international phenomenon. It has been written in history as the 'Twitter Revolution' (Jones & Mattiacci, 2019, p. 748) and the term 'Clicktivism' has occurred to refer to the organization of people through social media (Yeğen, 2015, p. 157). It is crucial to note that Gezi Protests began in May 2013 in Türkiye and The Euromaidan Protests started at the end of 2013 in Ukraine are some other examples of this trend.

The most interesting event regarding using social media for political agendas happened during the US Presidential Elections in 2016. In March 2018, news agencies revealed alleged cheating during the previous presidential elections as the Cambridge Analytica Scandal. As a part of this, it is claimed that Aleksandr Kogan, a lecturer at Cambridge University, created a personality and style-behavior modeling test called 'psychographics', applied to about 80 million Facebook users in the USA to change the faith of elections and referendum on BREXIT. One of the key points here is that people logged into many other applications via their Facebook accounts rather than signing up. This way, people gave important information such as names, locations, e-mail addresses, and friend lists to the relevant service providers without knowing it (Kozłowska, 2018). The company Cambridge Analytica has enabled the collection, analysis, and use of all this information within a new marketing strategy. Their main goal was to analyze all the savings of users and personalities and predict possible reactions and decisions on vital issues via the psychographic method of Kogan. Other than violating laws protecting personal data, this initiative allegedly fed polarization among people, revealed more radical thoughts of citizens, and changed the election result in 2016. At this point, it is crucial to remind that majority of these social media applications use algorithms that show relevant content to appeal to each user's appetite all the time. This led to 'homophily', which means people who like to be with others who think like themselves. With this tendency based on the algorithm of these applications, individuals became more interested in participating and making contributions and were encouraged to group and mobilize. This structure of algorithms of these social media platforms polarizes societies all around the world and makes social movements easier to occur (Hamdy, 2010, pp. 6-10). Adding the potential of bot accounts and fake news to the calculation, it is possible to think that social media and the internet have become major gadgets to achieve any political goal. In this perspective, it is crucial to recall that on July 29, 2018, the House of Commons Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport published a report on 'fake news' that also related to the elections in 2016. In this report, it is mentioned that 'relentless targeting of hyper-partisan views, which play to the fears and the prejudices of people, in order to alter their voting plans', is 'more invasive than obviously false information and called the combined impact of fake news and micro-targeting as a 'democratic crisis' (DCMS, 2018, p. 3).



Moreover, it is possible to say that such debatable platforms started to be used for specific foreign policy agendas. For instance, during the Second Karabakh War (The 44 Days War) in 2020, the just military aid of Türkiye to Azerbaijan was tried to be sabotaged by misinformation campaigns held on social media. The Armenian side tried to spread the view that Armenia was the buffer zone between Türkiye and Turkic Republics in Central Asia, and sole blockage to avoid enlargement of the sphere of influence of Ankara to the East. Thus, it is argued that Armenian interests must be protected. Also, recalling the lie of the so-called Armenian Genocide, they tried to create an illusion about the reason for war and claimed that history is repeating itself. Additionally, recalling the events of World War I, the dispute about the delimitation of the Aegean Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Cyprus Issue, a group of users asserted that Turkish authorities made a Greek genocide. In this sense, they have opened hashtags such as 'savearmenians', 'savegreeks' or 'boycottTurkey' on Twitter (Öztemel, 2021).

It can also be said that similar efforts to affect the perspectives of international audiences about the Russia-Ukraine War have been introduced. To exemplify, the President of the Turkish Grand National Assembly's Commission on Social Media and Digital Platforms, and MP from Hatay of AK Party, Hüseyin Yayman, gave an interview to CNN Turk on March 19, considering the recent developments in Ukraine and the impact of social media on it. He said, "The social media does not directly control a missile but determine where it could be sent to", and referred that disinformation has become a global problem. What's more, on Safe Internet Day (02/08/2022), Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure, Dr Ömer Fatih Sayan, highlighted the hate speech and misinformation on social media and claimed that these platforms act beyond their business goals, interfere in the domestic politics of states. He also claimed that these platforms are intentionally being used to challenge the national security and sustainability of states (Ertunç, 2022).

In brief, as Baudrillard said in his Simulation Theory, a super-reality that would overshadow the real world can easily be created within the scope of perception management. Hyper-reality is designed and disseminated by mass media. The made-up truth overshadows the real truth and leaves it in the background. When the 'truth', which the specific target audience would prefer to believe, is presented to this audience by perception managers at the right time, in the right medium and with the right communication tools, planned associations can be created in people's minds and hearts (Baudrillard, 2013). Adding the cartel-like situation of mostly US-based companies that provide services for social media and digital platforms, the situation becomes stricter for anyone who tries to challenge Washington's interests.

Russia-Ukraine War and the Impact of Digital Platforms and MNCs that operate in the Hi-tech Sector

In recent years, Russian foreign policy has been accused of being aggressive. Indeed, compared to the first years after the collapse of the USSR, Russian foreign policy became more active, focusing on regaining its sphere of influence. Theorized as the 'Near Abroad' or 'Russkiy Mir/Russian World' policy, inspired by the fear that appeared among the Russian ruling elite following the Orange (2004), Rose (2003), Tulip (2005) Revolutions, labeled as 'US-orchestrated' or 'NGO-special operation' (Popescu & Wilson, 2009, pp. 29-30), made Russian authorities to take stricter steps to guarantee the national security and stability of the region. Adding the Euro-maidan Protest in 2014 to the equation, it is impossible to think of what's happening in Ukraine now separately from these developments.

Russian authorities interpreted all these developments as a new type of encirclement policy. Albeit, some scholars like Engel called this a new 'Cold Peace' period (2014, pp. 119-121). Russian authorities created some soft power initiatives to conduct such policies to counter increasing American or European influence in its backyard. To achieve this, Russians living abroad (compatriots or minorities), Russian language, common history and culture, Orthodox Church, media, and even social media, including hackers that work for the Kremlin, bot accounts that change the density of views on social media or fake news, were used. Meanwhile, Russian authorities tried to introduce home-grown alternatives to these media, social media, and technological goods like Vkontakte, Yandex search engine, or Sputnik news agency.

As a result of the military operation that started on February 24, several Western countries imposed matchless sanctions on the Russian people. It is well-known that, after the invasion of Crimea in 2014, Kremlin was working on a sanction-proof economy, decreasing budget deficits, focusing on gold reserves, and began negotiations with major players of the world economy like China to create an alternative to the current model. Russian authorities introduced measures to combat the economic effect of potential sanctions and established the Mir payment system as an alternative to the dominance of Mastercard/Visa and the System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS) as an alternative to SWIFT. Also, it is seen that the traditional act of imposing sanctions on specific politicians or business people remains ineffective. However, it seems that Kremlin could not foresee having so heavy technological and cultural sanctions imposed on the Russian people. With the start of the war, Russian people were obliged to give up their most basic habits like using Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, watching videos on Youtube, wielding Google and Microsoft services for work, or shopping via Mastercard/Visa infrastructure. On the other side of the coin, the remaining population of the world became unaware of the situation in Russia, having prevented from listening to the



Russian narrative of the war. On the other hand, with the call of Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Mihailov Fedorov on Twitter to Elon Musk, Starlink's satellite-based internet service provider became free and available for Ukrainian people to mobilize (Aljazeera, 2022).

Furthermore, satellite-based observation and communication systems became major weapons in this war. For example, as soon as the Russian military operations started, Viasat, a US-based provider of high-speed satellite broadband services, also to the Ukrainian army, suffered an outage (Rid, 2022). Additionally, Russia allegedly jammed GPS signals in Ukraine and erased the ability of Ukrainians to determine their location, navigate and send weapons to appropriate targets (Hitchens, 2022). Some commercial service providers joined this competition. For example, Google Maps suspended its operations regarding traffic jams, as it might be used to target troops or refugees (Meaker, 2022). The Canadian MDA satellite service served the Ukrainian army to target Russian troops (Wark, 2022). In addition, Maxar Technologies revealed images of the 40-mile Russian military convoy on the road Kyiv (Sky News, 2022). Russian authorities used their satellites to compete with the international aid that the Ukrainian side had and warned the world about a potential attack on its space infrastructure. Dmitry Rogozin, who is the head of the Roscosmos (Russian alternative to NASA), said that Russia would treat any hacking of its satellites as a 'casus belli' (a reason for war) (Reuters, 2022). Also, on the technology-based cultural sanctions related to Instagram, Russia created its national alternative, Rossgram (Dodgson, 2022).

On the perception management side of the war, it can be seen that social media platforms are becoming more powerful. At this point, Ukrainian President Zelensky is well-informed about social media management from his early career and victory in the Presidential Elections of 2019. In the light of this, he called for the usage of any platform to declare Ukraine's claims. For instance, in one of his speeches, he appealed to 'Tiktokers' as they might help end the war. Also, a Ukrainian travel blogger named Alina Volik, who has about 36,000 followers on social media, started to share posts about the invasion and help people "see the truth" about the war (Dang & Culliford, 2022). In addition, on a Russian-originated platform, Telegram, serious reflections of the war can be seen. Ukraine's Security Service tweeted that the live monitoring and release of what Russian troops were doing on the field by Ukrainian civilians on the Telegram chatbot helped them to target the enemy. So, the agency called on ordinary citizens to act like war correspondents and 'join the information front' of the war. About these developments, Ian Garner, a historian and translator of Russian war propaganda, underlined that Ukrainian and Russian propaganda goes side by side on Telegram, and the information war has been outsourced to a private company (Bergengruen, 2022).

Projections about the Post-War Period and the State-Businesses Rivalry

It is alleged that Russia is far from achieving its political agenda to overthrow the government in Kyiv but is about to take control of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Mariupol, and necessary fields to have an on-land connection with Russia and South & East of Ukraine. On economic and cultural sanctions, it is possible to say that the Russian economy is fighting back using petro-carrots and petro-sticks to divide the EU, similar to the gas crisis of 2006 and 2009. No proper analysis could be done as the majority of the world is not aware of the reaction of the Russian people to these cultural sanctions. For now, no serious civil movements occurred against the government as it is expected by Western countries. What is clear here is that states will try to take issues related to social media and digital platforms more seriously, have an eye on MNCs centered abroad, and, if possible, have home-grown alternatives to not only satellites for communication and observation systems but also for technological goods that people use in daily basis. For instance, In March 2022, while European states presented full support to the policies of the US-based companies to isolate Russia and Russian technology firms from global markets, European Parliament accepted Digital Markets Act (DMA). The act introduces multiliteracy and fair competition in the market by introducing strict economic and administrative rules that enhance the authority of member states over these hi-tech companies.

According to this, digital services, including search engines, which value above 75 billion Euro and have at least 45 million individual, or 10,000 business-oriented users and 7,5 billion USD income, would be classified as 'gatekeepers' (basic source of information for people). They will be obliged to obey certain rules inserted in order to protect the competitive structure of the market. It is referred that in case of any violation, authorities can punish these firms with administrative fees that cost 10% of their annual revenue, which would be increased to 20% (Dünya, 2022), (Taftalı et al., 2022). Also, laws on the fight against fake news and disinformation on social media were inserted in 2018. Turkish authorities are also preparing to introduce similar regulations on these agents.

Another interesting development is that: Alexander Beglov, the head of local government, announced that St. Petersburg and the Mariupol would become sister cities, and authorities are ready to begin re-construction projects (Sullivan, 2022). Similarly, in a video call with Elon Musk, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called him to invest in Ukraine, especially in the space sector and rebuilding the state, at the height of the escalations (Ensonhaber, 2022).

In light of this information, it can be said that other than military competition, there can be a potential rivalry in terms of lifestyle, luxuries, and physical infra-

structure between the areas under the control of the Ukrainian government and the de facto control of Russia, similar to the one between the East and West Berlin in the Cold War. What should be emphasized here is that, unlike the Cold War period, MNCs, especially those that operate in Web 3.0 sectors, would have a major role, and hybrid measures of war might suppress traditional techniques of war. In this sense, developed states that are home to these companies will be very advantageous and increase their capabilities in the international arena, while developing states whose people are dependent and even addicted to these technologies may be weak against possible sanctions and open to interference of others. Thus, many of them would try to have options to cope with the impact of this dependency, like raising public awareness or developing options to block these gadgets' activities. To exemplify, it is declared that China started trials on anti-satellite missiles in May 2022 (Dursun, 2022).

Conclusion

It is possible to see that all direct and indirect sides of the conflict, the USA, EU member states, neighboring states, China, Russia, and Ukraine, try to ensure their interests through all diplomatic negotiations for peace, military, and hybrid methods for enhancing their capabilities on the battlefield. All sides see the war as the forward steps of another world war and act under the ideals of the Realist Theory of International Relations, such as being a self-help state but continue to use slogans and propaganda techniques of liberal theory for their interests. In this respect, it is possible to claim that the hybrid measures of war from technological services, digital platforms, and communication technologies to space technologies and more involvement of MNCs will become more visible in this rivalry. To fight against the digital hegemony of the US via companies and basic service providers like Google or Meta, governments must look into the old debate on using national alternatives and try to have know-how transfer and investment. Meanwhile, governments should have to keep an eye on the activities of these companies and guarantee that there is minimum interference of them in domestic politics and international relations of the state.

This new empowerment of the hybrid war phenomenon will forever change the relationship between state and businesses. It will become more common to threaten government authorities by mobilizing people with fake news or advantages of algorithms that polarize the public in domestic politics and propagate the narrative of counter-foreign policy initiatives for target audiences. Governments will try to insert regulations or suspend activities of these services, but this time, they might be accused of introducing censorship methods, and further negativity among people could occur. A new dilemma will become more obvious for states

with this war. It seems that what state authorities have to do is to raise awareness among people as such technologies create a fauna opposite of Habermas's public sphere, which is based on equality but could be used as gadgets of rival states for benevolent acts.



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