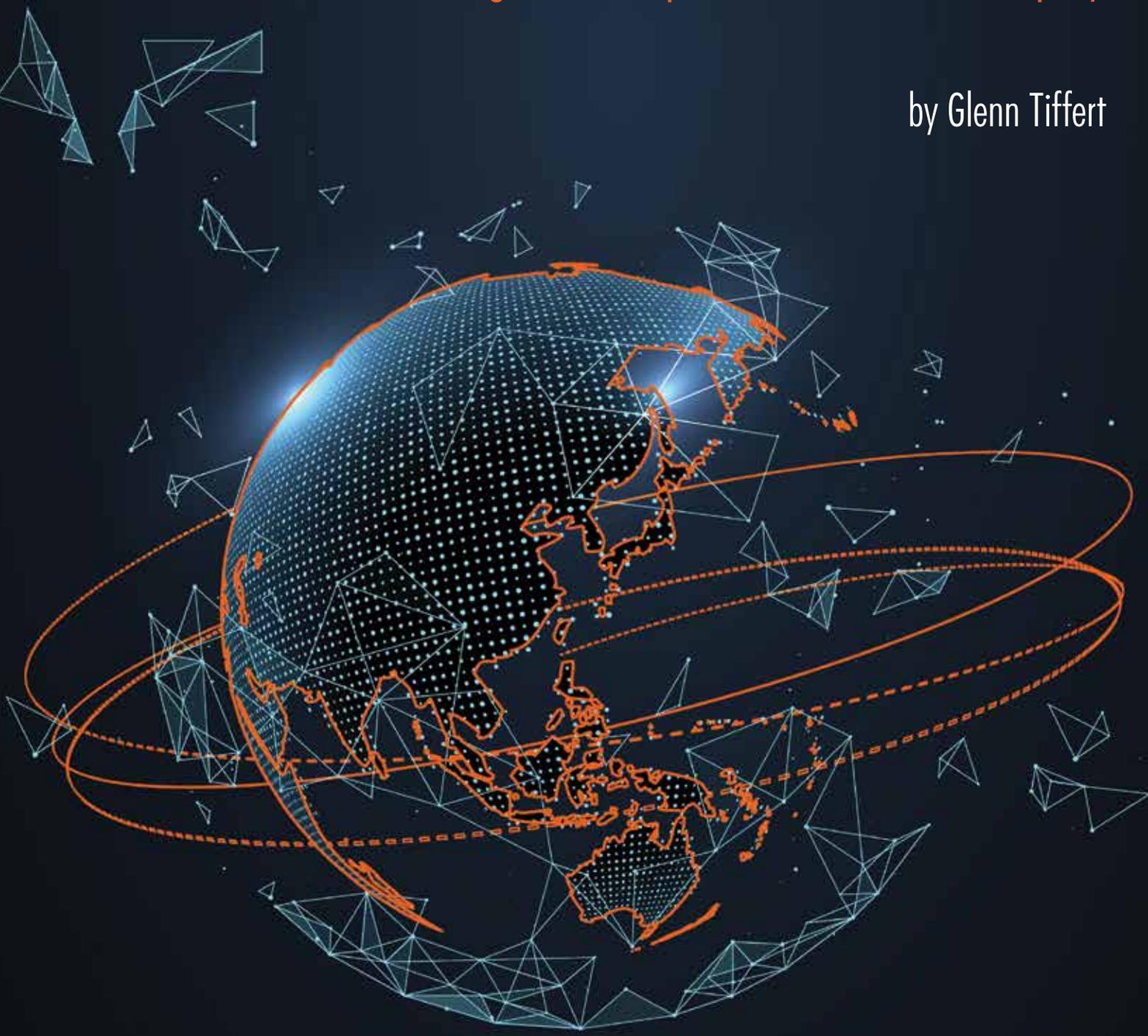


Compromising the Knowledge Economy

Authoritarian Challenges to Independent Intellectual Inquiry

by Glenn Tiffert



National Endowment
for Democracy
Supporting freedom around the world

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International Forum for Democratic Studies

ABOUT THE SHARP POWER AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE SERIES

As globalization deepens integration between democracies and autocracies, the compromising effects of sharp power—which impairs free expression, neutralizes independent institutions, and distorts the political environment—have grown apparent across crucial sectors of open societies. The Sharp Power and Democratic Resilience series is an effort to systematically analyze the ways in which leading authoritarian regimes seek to manipulate the political landscape and censor independent expression within democratic settings, and to highlight potential civil society responses.

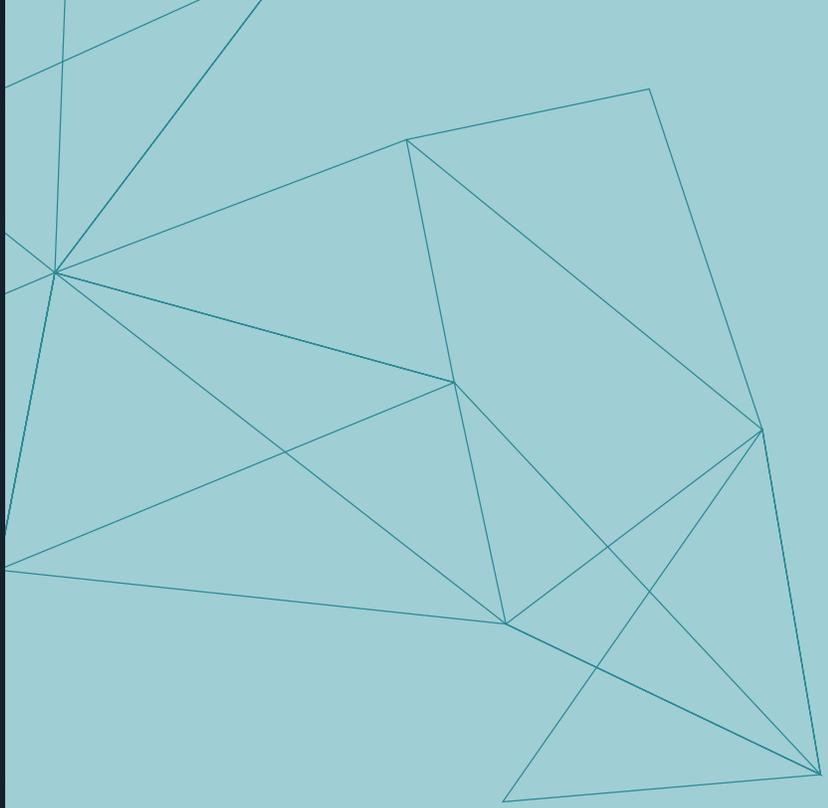
This initiative examines emerging issues in four crucial arenas relating to the integrity and vibrancy of democratic systems:

- Challenges to free expression and the integrity of the media and information space
- Threats to intellectual inquiry
- Contestation over the principles that govern technology
- Leverage of state-driven capital for political and often corrosive purposes

The present era of authoritarian resurgence is taking place during a protracted global democratic downturn that has degraded the confidence of democracies. The leading authoritarians are challenging democracy at the level of ideas, principles, and standards, but only one side seems to be seriously competing in the contest.

Global interdependence has presented complications distinct from those of the Cold War era, which did not afford authoritarian regimes so many opportunities for action within democracies. At home, Beijing, Moscow, and others have used twenty-first-century tools and tactics to reinvigorate censorship and manipulate the media and other independent institutions. Beyond their borders, they utilize educational and cultural initiatives, media outlets, think tanks, private sector initiatives, and other channels of engagement to influence the public sphere for their own purposes, refining their techniques along the way. Such actions increasingly shape intellectual inquiry and the integrity of the media space, as well as affect emerging technologies and the development of norms. Meanwhile, autocrats have utilized their largely hybrid state-capitalist systems to embed themselves in the commerce and economies of democracies in ways that were hardly conceivable in the past.

The new environment requires going beyond the necessary but insufficient tools of legislation, regulation, or other governmental solutions. Democracies possess a critical advantage that authoritarian systems do not—the creativity and solidarity of vibrant civil societies that can help safeguard institutions and reinforce democratic values. Thus, the papers in this series aim to contextualize the nature of sharp power, inventory key authoritarian efforts and domains, and illuminate ideas for non-governmental action that are essential to strengthening democratic resilience.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glenn Tiffert is a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution, and a historian of modern China. His research has centered on Chinese legal history, including publications on constitutionalism, the judiciary, and the genealogy of the rule of law in the People's Republic of China (PRC). His forthcoming book, entitled *Judging Revolution*, radically re-interprets the Mao era and the 1949 revolution by way of a deep archival dive into the origins of the PRC judicial system. His current research probes the ramifications of China's rise for American interests. He works closely with government and university partners to strengthen resilience against authoritarian influence in the academic sector.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Challenges to independent intellectual inquiry are mounting around the world. In many countries, traditional state censorship and repression are resurgent. But freer societies, which are uniquely dependent on civil society institutions such as universities and publishers for knowledge production, face a new class of threat: authoritarian regimes—primarily China, but also Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others—are exploiting unanticipated vulnerabilities in open knowledge economies to challenge free intellectual inquiry from the inside.

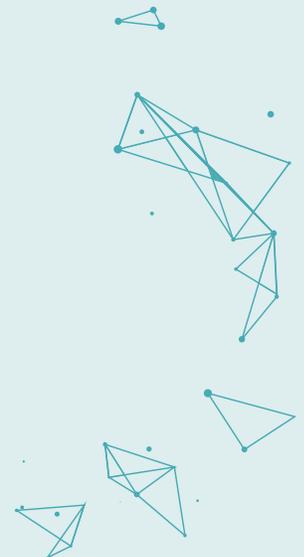
By systematically coopting foreign partners, marginalizing or intimidating dissenters, controlling discourse, and globalizing their preferred narratives, these authoritarian regimes intend to discredit democracy, shore up their positions at home, and facilitate the projection of their power and interests abroad. The authoritarian response to the COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies these trends.

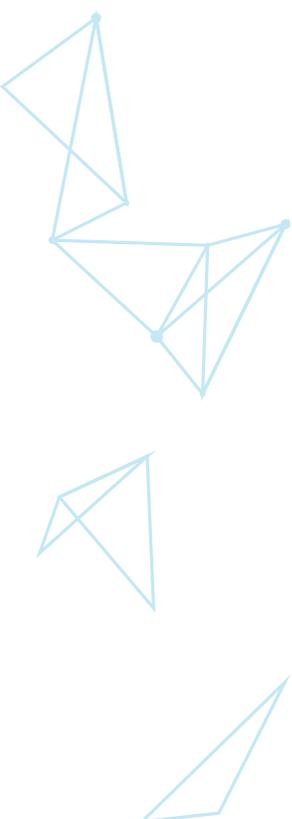
These activities belong to an integrated toolkit of measures directed against democratic values and practices. Combined with the artful exploitation of globalization by authoritarian regimes, the ramifications for democracies of these systematic forms of censorship are profound.

As authoritarian powers have deepened their international engagement, risk management and due diligence protocols have failed to keep pace with malign influence. But in the past year, democracies have begun to respond, and a multi-tiered strategy is beginning to emerge:

- The academic and publishing sectors must **seize the opportunity to better self-police** before governments step in with blunt legislative and regulatory solutions. Knowledge workers and their employers must institutionalize procedures and **build mechanisms for collective security** to prevent authoritarian partners from using divide-and-rule tactics or forum shopping to break their resolve and encourage a race to the bottom.
- Authors, journals, learned societies, and publishers must **develop detailed best practices** and then stipulate them in contracts so that localized instances of censorship are handled in ethical and transparent ways that account for the interests of all parties.
- Institutions with authoritarian exposure must **prepare contingency plans** for a menu of unpalatable events, including the detention of personnel, the censorship of publications, the theft of intellectual property, the incitement of campus protests, or the abrupt cancellation or closure of programs.
- In addition to defending the perimeter, our knowledge institutions, especially universities, must **reduce exposure to financial coercion** by diversifying the sources of their income.
- In a decentralized, lightly regulated, and competitive marketplace, many actors behave as opportunistic free agents, entrepreneurially chasing the most gainful deals they can find. Strengthening **solidarity among scholars and institutions** will help improve their bargaining power and protect them from predatory brinkmanship and intimidation.

Intellectual freedom only flourishes so long as we sustain and invest in the ecosystem that supports it. Resisting the compromising effects of sharp power requires a communal awakening backed by heightened regulatory and institutional standards, major investments in employee training and compliance, robust monitoring, and the fortitude to say “no” to authoritarian influence.





Challenges to independent intellectual inquiry are mounting around the world. In many countries, traditional state censorship and repression are conspicuously resurgent, but in freer societies—including both mature and developing democracies—a more diffuse class of threats has arisen that observers have been slower to recognize. The latter stem primarily from the unanticipated vulnerabilities that economic and technological change have introduced into open ecosystems of knowledge. When combined with the artful exploitation of globalization by authoritarian regimes, these conditions make for a toxic brew.

Democracies are uniquely dependent on civil society institutions such as publishers and universities for knowledge production. In recent years, the intensifying marketization of the knowledge economy has increased the financial and competitive pressures on these institutions, transforming their incentive structures, performance benchmarks, and funding models, and in the process potentially compromising their autonomy and resistance to external influence. Budgetary constraints are squeezing capacity, aggravating intrasectoral inequality, and diminishing risk tolerance, which has reshaped output.

The rise of online platforms has further redistributed power within this economy, and permitted some participants to establish commanding positions and exercise quasi-governmental authority over their respective domains. These platforms are aggregating knowledge and repackaging it as digital services, delivered through channels that combine ongoing monetization with unparalleled opportunities to manipulate our information space and globalize surveillance, propaganda, and disinformation.

Finally, for better or worse, populist critics are seizing on the tension between intellectual freedom and public accountability to sharply question the authority and legitimacy of many bodies of knowledge, the experts and organizations behind them, and the interests they serve.

The ramifications of these developments are profound. Purely in domestic terms, they are impinging on the robust and open competition of ideas that democratic societies depend on for renewal. Good governance requires a commitment to rigorous empiricism sustained by copious inputs of high-quality data, reliable and pluralistic feedback mechanisms, and creative insights into problems. Independent intellectual inquiry, particularly as supported by publishers and universities, can foster these essential public goods, and serve both as a check on the performance of the political process and as a balance against its capture or corruption by parochial interests. By surfacing unmet needs and marginal voices, opposing ideological ossification, and promoting the consensual negotiation of competing interests and agendas, free inquiry can enhance the quality and legitimacy of policymaking and affirm the exercise of popular sovereignty. It also provides a channel through which individuals can engage with their society by expressing the diverse meanings they attach to their lives. Conversely, the more challenging independent intellectual inquiry becomes, the more difficult it will be to realize the promise of democracy and to reverse declining levels of satisfaction with it.¹

Authoritarian regimes grasp these connections, and are exploiting vulnerabilities in open knowledge economies to discredit democracy as a viable political alternative, shore up their positions at home, and facilitate the projection of their power and interests abroad. Among them, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is in a class by itself by dint of its population and wealth, but others—including Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—are also systematically coopting foreign

partners, marginalizing or intimidating dissenters, controlling discourses, and globalizing their preferred narratives.² Their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic exemplify these trends.

These operations belong to an integrated toolkit of measures directed against democratic values and practices. Risk management and due diligence protocols have not kept pace with their development, and authoritarian actors are capitalizing on that gap to cajole or coerce from democracies a tyranny of small decisions that poses a systemic challenge to free intellectual inquiry from the inside. Resisting this corrosion requires a communal awakening backed by heightened regulatory and institutional standards, major investments in employee training and compliance, robust monitoring, and the fortitude simply to say “no.”

FREEDOMS UNDER ASSAULT AT HOME AND ABROAD

Assaults on intellectual freedom typically begin at home, but their reach is increasingly global. For instance, following the failed 2016 coup in Turkey, the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan purged tens of thousands of teachers, charged hundreds of academics with terrorism-related offenses, and imprisoned dozens of journalists.³ Thousands are still trapped in limbo, banned from their professions and prevented from exiting the country, or fearful to return home.⁴ The long arm of the state is also reaching into the Turkish diaspora by abusing Interpol processes to track down, intimidate, and seek the extradition of critics living abroad, saddling some with detention orders and lengthy court battles.⁵

In 2017, the European Commission referred Hungary to the European Court of Justice on the grounds that amendments to its Higher Education Law violated the right to academic freedom.⁶ Two years later, the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán nevertheless relied on those amendments to compel Central European University, a bastion of academic independence, to shift the majority of its operations out of the country. Shortly thereafter, the government signed a memorandum of understanding with China’s Fudan University to open an overseas campus in Budapest, the first such agreement anywhere for a PRC university.⁷

A similar campaign of regulatory strangulation is shrinking the space for academic freedom in Russia, where operating licenses or accreditation for two prestigious private universities with links to Western Europe and the United States have been revoked in recent years.⁸ Soviet-style “first departments” (*pervii otdel*) tasked with enforcing political control are reappearing in Russian universities and other academic institutions.⁹

In the PRC, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) general secretary Xi Jinping has unleashed the most sweeping intensification of ideological discipline in more than forty years.¹⁰ His intentions were laid bare in a 2013 internal circular that leaked to the international media. Known popularly as Document 9, this circular demanded vigilance and intense struggle against various “false ideological trends” and the domestic activists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and “Western anti-China forces” that promote them. The enumerated trends included Western constitutional democracy, universal values, civil society, economic neoliberalism, and freedom of the press.¹¹ Ever since, the climate for free inquiry and expression in the PRC has progressively deteriorated. Official pronouncements intended for international audiences may speak invitingly of building “a community of common destiny” and “shared global governance,” but documents for the CCP rank and file read like throwbacks to an earlier age, replete with the language of warfare, such as strident exhortations “to seize the initiative on the ideological battlefield.”

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The PRC party-state is vigorously executing Xi's mandate.¹² In a 2016 guiding opinion on the evaluation of academic personnel, the Ministry of Education promised that “the spread of illegal and harmful ideas and speech in the classroom will be dealt with severely according to (administrative) discipline and law.”¹³ Some university faculty now endure video surveillance of their teaching, and others have been punished after student informants covertly reported them to campus authorities.¹⁴ The pressure is greatest in the humanities and social sciences, where use of foreign materials in the classroom is now discouraged, censorship of publications has intensified, and research programs and paeans devoted to the official ideology of Xi Jinping Thought are proliferating. In 2019, several prominent universities, including Fudan, removed references to “freedom of thought” and academic independence from their charters, and inserted new references to Xi Jinping Thought and party leadership.¹⁵ These and related measures have had a chilling and regressive effect on academic life.¹⁶

This accelerating inquisition has spilled over into Hong Kong, where it has eroded cherished freedoms and fanned widespread discontent. In 2015, five employees or owners of Causeway Bay Books, a local bookseller that offered titles banned elsewhere in the PRC, were abducted and resurfaced in police custody on the mainland. With Hong Kong no longer safe for such ventures, a once vibrant corner of the local publishing scene has withered. It is too soon to say what price Hong Kong will ultimately pay for the protests that convulsed it in 2019, but the city and its universities have been under growing political pressure from Beijing and its local allies for years. In 2017, ten major Hong Kong universities issued a joint statement describing pro-independence messages from student activists as unconstitutional “abuses” of free expression, and liberal faculty have encountered creeping resistance to their appointments and promotions.¹⁷

Driven by Xi's exhortations, the PRC is pressing its ideological offensive abroad, impacting foreign academia, publishers, and NGOs.¹⁸ For instance, on the eve of the 2014 annual meeting in Portugal of the European Association of Chinese Studies, PRC personnel, acting on instructions from a visiting vice minister, seized the conference program and tore out pages that referred to sponsorship from Taiwan.¹⁹ In 2017, the PRC government began requiring foreign joint-venture universities in China to establish internal CCP committees and to appoint party secretaries to their management boards. The University of California, Berkeley; New York University; Duke University; the University of Michigan; and the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom are among the nine foreign universities that operate such ventures in the PRC, typically as minority partners.²⁰ The CCP is steadily tightening oversight of their operations and squeezing local faculty, staff, and students.

In 2019, Sweden's minister of culture and democracy awarded Swedish PEN's Tucholsky Prize to one of the five Causeway Bay Books abductees in absentia. Undeterred by the fact that the imprisoned recipient, Gui Minhai, is actually a Swedish citizen, the PRC retaliated against Sweden by canceling major trade delegations, denying journalist visas, and leveling threats through its ambassador.²¹ Similarly, the PRC government asserted that several prominent U.S.-based human rights NGOs “shoulder some of the responsibility for the chaos in Hong Kong,” and announced unspecified sanctions against them.²² Several weeks later, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, an American, was denied entry to Hong Kong.²³

Foreign scholars researching the PRC report a range of repressive experiences that vary by field and topic of study.²⁴ Only a small minority suffer physical coercion, and the risk to foreigners of imprisonment for scholarly pursuits is generally greater elsewhere, most notoriously in Iran and the United Arab Emirates.²⁵ In one recent case, a visiting Japanese historian was arrested in Beijing by officers of the Ministry of State Security, and then deported several weeks later after confessing to “collecting inappropriate historical materials”—reportedly sources on twentieth-century history that he had purchased openly at a local bookstore.²⁶

Usually, the pressure is more subtle. PRC diplomats monitor scholarly research output and engagements abroad, including petitions, public lectures, and participation on social media and email lists. Some overseas Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) and individual students from the PRC reputedly assist with this collection. As a result, letters of invitation, and access to sources and research sites in the PRC are sometimes withdrawn. Outright visa denials remain infrequent, but visas are commonly delayed right up to the edge of their useful dates or beyond, or simply never issued at all. Once in the country, foreign scholars encounter surveillance, and their local informants and associates are questioned and intimidated by the authorities. This author once employed a research assistant whose poor tradecraft exposed his identity as a Ministry of Public Security officer. These tactics are meant to induce self-censorship in the academic community at large by forcing scholars to guess for themselves where the redlines might be and then to err on the side of caution. The degree of self-censorship among China watchers is a subject of debate to be sure, but the phenomenon is real.²⁷ Its burden falls most heavily on those who have family in the PRC or who depend on routine access to the country for their research and professional advancement.

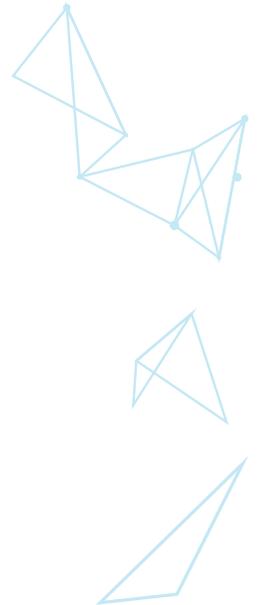
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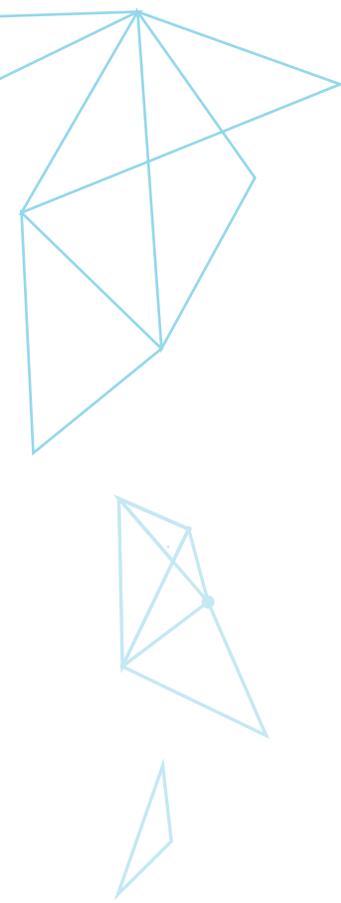
When democratic institutions that are integral to an open knowledge economy, such as universities and publishers, partner with entities based in authoritarian states, they expose themselves to perils that traditional due diligence and risk management frameworks were not designed to negotiate.²⁸ Most fundamentally, these institutions cannot assume that their partners share their core values. In fact, their partners may actually be indifferent or hostile to those values, and exempt from comparable standards of transparency or accountability for transgressions against them. To prevent the lowest common denominator from prevailing, democratic institutions must be prepared to shoulder responsibility for defending and upholding their values alone. Under such circumstances, local organizational shortcomings, naiveté, conflicts of interest, venality, and parochialism loom much larger than they otherwise would, and carry higher stakes.

When universities contemplate foreign partnerships, research ventures and collaborations in business, science, and technology are often the easiest to achieve because they align with shared priorities and can be framed in ways that minimize or externalize ethical and political sensitivities. Business, science, and technology are global, the argument goes, and development officers and senior administrators are incentivized to strike deals, not to throw obstacles in the way. Laudable goals such as combatting climate change and disease can make these proposals especially compelling. Yet for reasons having to do with their own professional backgrounds and bureaucratic processes, decision makers may lack sufficient awareness of the hazards specific to a given foreign engagement.²⁹ Thus the Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the Business School at Rutgers University, and the School of Engineering at York University in Canada all accepted millions of dollars from iFlytek, a PRC artificial intelligence firm that the U.S. Department of Commerce later placed on its restricted entity list because of connections to human rights abuses and state repression in Xinjiang Autonomous Uighur Region.³⁰ (In February 2020, MIT ended its collaboration with iFlyTek.³¹) With respect to the biomedical sciences, observance of fundamental norms governing human subjects research has been a persistent problem in the PRC.

The humanities and social sciences are no less prone to blunders. In 2014, after a sensational scandal involving the Libyan government of Muammar Gaddafi, the London School of Economics adopted an ethics code that

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champions integrity and intellectual freedom.³² However, administrators soon shifted key provisions on working with outside parties to a subsidiary document, which eased consideration in 2019 of a multimillion-dollar gift from Eric Li, a staunchly pro-Beijing venture capitalist, to support an academic program that would have been overseen by “distinguished individuals from China.”³³ In 2011, Griffith University in Australia signed an agreement with Confucius Institute Headquarters in Beijing (Hanban) to open a Confucius Institute on its campus. The title of the agreement contains an obvious typographical error, and article 12, on dispute resolution, ends abruptly with a nonsensical and incomplete sentence. By all appearances, the English text was prepared by the PRC side and translated poorly from a Chinese original, and the university abstained from an elementary proofreading before its vice chancellor signed.³⁴ Worse, in 2017, the Free University of Berlin signed a contract with the Hanban worth nearly €500,000 to endow a professorship in Chinese language and literature. The university agreed not just that PRC law would govern the interpretation and enforcement of the contract and that the Hanban retained the right to reduce or terminate funding in the event of a violation of PRC law, but also that a PRC tribunal would arbitrate any disputes.³⁵ In short, a prestigious German university bound itself to the PRC’s illiberal norms, and furthermore handed a PRC tribunal the legal authority to judge its performance.³⁶

External funding is absolutely essential to the modern research institution but, even when it comes with no formal strings attached, it can erode integrity and independence. At the very least, it generates local constituencies that are invested in sustaining their favored revenue streams and in keeping their sponsors satisfied, which becomes awkward if those sponsors are prone to assert substantive preferences. Worse, it can encourage self-dealing and corruption. In the Czech Republic, faculty members at Charles University ran a sideline business that took undeclared payments from the PRC embassy to organize conferences at a university center they administered.³⁷ The H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center & Research Institute in Florida fired its president, vice president, and four researchers because of compliance violations stemming from undeclared participation in the PRC’s “Thousand Talents” recruitment program.³⁸ In early 2020, the Federal Bureau of Investigation arrested the chair of Harvard University’s Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology, a researcher at the leading edge of medical applications of nanotechnology, for allegedly lying to investigators about his undisclosed participation in the same recruitment scheme. The arrangement reportedly entitled him to a “\$50,000 monthly salary, \$150,000 in annual living expenses and more than \$1.5 million for a second laboratory” in the PRC.³⁹

As these examples indicate, transparency is a pressing concern. Section 117 of the U.S. Higher Education Act requires universities to report foreign gifts and contracts valued at \$250,000 or more to the federal government. Yet in 2019, the U.S. secretary of education announced that according to a preliminary investigation, six American universities failed to report \$1.3 billion in foreign funds from nations such as the PRC, Russia, and Qatar.⁴⁰ Yale University reported no foreign gifts or contracts at all from 2014 through 2017 despite operating numerous programs abroad.⁴¹ Fortunately, reforms may be afoot. Regulatory changes and closer governmental scrutiny are compelling universities to strengthen their compliance protocols. Between July 2019 and February 2020, American universities belatedly disclosed at least \$6.5 billion in previously unreported foreign gifts, grants, and contracts.⁴² In response to pointed questions about its own funding sources and research collaborations, MIT has announced a new review process for “elevated-risk” international proposals from the PRC (including Hong Kong), Russia, and Saudi Arabia.⁴³

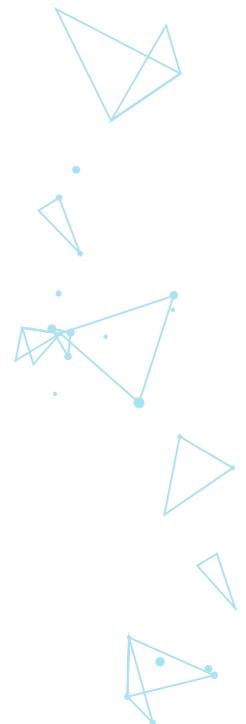
Anecdotal evidence suggests that faculty who raise uncomfortable questions about potential high-value foreign partnerships risk marginalization by their local administrators and exclusion from future consultation.⁴⁴ And that is just the minority with secure, tenured employment. Owing to structural shifts in the higher education sector that mirror changes in the economy at large, most other faculty have a precarious grip on their professions, and competition is intense. As of 2016, 73 percent of instructional faculty in U.S. universities held contingent appointments, and more than

half of all faculty appointments were part-time.⁴⁵ Challenging potentially lucrative deals, losing visa access to a country, or provoking retaliation against one's employer could prematurely end careers that may already be hanging by a thread.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, the number of students from the PRC studying in the United States has tripled to nearly 370,000. One out of every three international students in the United States hails from the PRC, and no other country of origin comes close to that share.⁴⁶ Unlike most domestic students, they generally pay full tuition, adding approximately \$15 billion to the U.S. economy. Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom are proportionately even more reliant on the contributions of students from the PRC. In all of these systems, such students plug budgetary holes left by shrinking state support. A major disruption to that revenue stream would plunge these schools into distress and force searing adjustments to their business models. As a precaution, in 2018 the University of Illinois purchased insurance against exactly that contingency.⁴⁷ In New Zealand in early 2020, universities appealed for a student exemption from the temporary entry ban their government imposed on travelers from the PRC on the grounds that this public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic could cost them more than NZ\$150 million in lost tuition revenue. Half of all foreign university students in New Zealand come from the PRC.⁴⁸

PRC authorities have been keen to test the leverage this supply chain dependence generates. For example, in the United Kingdom, they threatened to withhold students from Oxford University in an unsuccessful bid to force the school's chancellor, Chris Patten, to cancel a visit to Hong Kong, where he had once served as colonial governor.⁴⁹ After the Dalai Lama delivered the 2017 commencement address at the University of California, San Diego, the PRC government retaliated by prohibiting visiting scholars with China Scholarship Council grants from attending the university, and blocking the transfer of funds for a joint research center.⁵⁰ Similarly, after the University of Calgary ignored warnings not to issue the Dalai Lama an honorary degree in 2009, the PRC government struck the university from its list of accredited foreign universities for one year. That cast a cloud over the value of the university's degrees, threw a spanner into its plan to recruit up to one-quarter of its foreign students from the PRC, and prompted matriculating PRC students to transfer to other schools.⁵¹ Most recently, in 2018, the University of Maryland suffered serious disruptions to the executive training programs run by its Office of China Affairs after the university pushed back against withering attacks on a student who had used a graduation speech to compare the conditions for freedom of speech and democracy in her native China with those in the United States.

Notably, the PRC is not alone in weaponizing enrollments. In 2018, after Canadian foreign minister Chrystia Freeland used social media to voice support for imprisoned Saudi women's rights activists, Saudi Arabia abruptly expelled the Canadian ambassador from Riyadh and announced that it would withdraw all state-sponsored Saudi students from Canada, a group numbering around 5,000.⁵² It was estimated that their loss would cost Canadian universities more than C\$100 million annually and trigger an acute staffing crisis in Canadian hospitals, since a large fraction of the students were medical residents or fellows. While the Saudi government ultimately permitted the medical students to stay, the number of Saudi students enrolled in Canadian universities the following year fell by almost half, and the number of new study permits issued to them by the Canadian government has fallen nearly 80 percent since 2018.⁵³ On top of this, in 2019 the credit rating agency Moody's warned that three of Canada's top universities could face financial emergencies if the PRC reacted similarly to the Canadian government's detention of Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei, who was accused of violating U.S. sanctions on Iran. PRC students make up nearly two-thirds of international students at the University of Toronto, one-third at the University of British Columbia, and almost one-fourth at McGill University.⁵⁴ On average, an international student in Canada pays four times the tuition of a domestic student.



CAMPUSES OFFER NO SANCTUARY

The PRC Ministry of Education promotes an ethnonationalist curriculum of “patriotic education” that seeks to “teach the essential commonality of love for the country, love for the Party, and love for socialism.”⁵⁵ This mandate has been pursued to devastating effect in the far western region of Xinjiang, where the state forced more than a million people into indoctrination camps in a bid to crush the distinct cultural identities of Uighurs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities.

A 2019 supplement to the Ministry of Education's plan globalizes the mandate by calling for patriotic struggle to inculcate support for the CCP's unyielding brand of national and ethnic unity (*guojia tongyi he minzu tuanjie*) throughout the Chinese diaspora.⁵⁶ While most PRC students abroad approach contentious issues of territory and identity with an open mind, their forbearance is plainly in spite of this policy rather than because of it. State policy and the diplomats who amplify it are inciting some students to vehemently rebuke those who hold opposing views, and creating psychic stress and a climate of fear among others who opt to self-censor so as not to appear disloyal.⁵⁷ Their reach can be found in the menacing counterdemonstrations around the world that support Beijing's position on Hong Kong, and in the threats leveled against PRC students who express independent positions—and their families. As one masked man from Hong Kong declared at the University of Queensland in 2019, “even in Australia now we cannot be seen here at a protest. We are not out of sight of China's government. They have made that clear.”⁵⁸ This campaign, part of a multidimensional strategy “to seize the right to speak” on behalf of the PRC state, is fundamentally incompatible with the tolerance that lies at the heart of genuine intellectual freedom. It aims to censor and dominate rather than to debate and persuade.

Lest there be any doubt, in 2019 the CCP Central Committee published a compilation of Xi's speeches under the title “On Adhering to the Party's Leadership in All Work.”⁵⁹ In keeping with that message, all members of the CCP and its youth league are obliged to faithfully execute party policy, including in their work abroad. As representatives of a Leninist organization that has lately redoubled its commitments to ideological discipline and democratic centralism, these members live in tension with the pluralistic values of liberal democratic societies. It is their duty to monitor and report back on activities, conversations, and people of interest, and their performance of this mission carries personal risks and rewards. PRC students understand this well, and many modulate their behavior accordingly. One such student observed that an American classroom “isn't a free space,” and political expression by PRC students in the United States can in fact have consequences when they return home.⁶⁰ In November 2019, a man was sentenced by a PRC court to six months in prison for “provocation.” According to the court's judgment, his crime was posting a series of “comments denigrating a [PRC] national leader's image and indecent pictures” on Twitter “while he was studying at the University of Minnesota.”⁶¹ Twitter is blocked in the PRC.

By flexing its market power, China has effectively outsourced its censorship to a range of entities that are integral to open knowledge economies.

The CSSAs that many universities rely on to help students from the PRC acclimatize to campus life merit special attention in this regard. Although the associations provide valuable social and cultural services, some also serve as a surveillance apparatus, early warning system, and mobilizational arm of the local PRC consulate. In 2017, the University of California, San Diego chapter openly coordinated with the local consulate its protest against the university's invitation to the Dalai Lama to deliver a commencement address.⁶² In 2019, the student union of McMaster University in Canada rescinded accreditation of its campus CSSA chapter for reporting to the local consulate about a talk on Xinjiang.⁶³ In short, CSSAs are a principal route through which

the PRC state projects its influence over not just its own citizens, but also the foreign institutions and personnel with whom those citizens engage. Online Chinese-language media and messaging platforms such as WeChat advance these objectives by tethering students from the PRC to state-controlled information bubbles, even when they venture abroad.

THE BUSINESS OF CENSORSHIP

By flexing its market power, the PRC has effectively outsourced its censorship to a range of entities that are integral to open knowledge economies. For instance, LinkedIn, a Microsoft company, reports to PRC users that this author's profile "is not available," because the profile quotes from the official abstract of a scholarly publication about the bloody suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. In 2017, Cambridge University Press (CUP) created a sanitized, country-specific edition of the respected British academic journal *The China Quarterly* when, at the behest of its PRC importer, it quietly removed approximately 315 articles and book reviews from the online archive it offers users in that country. It reversed course only after media exposure sparked intense criticism and reputational harm.⁶⁴ By contrast, Springer-Nature, which bills itself as the largest academic publisher in the world, continues to censor over a thousand of its own titles for PRC subscribers.⁶⁵ Taylor & Francis, another leading publisher that includes the Routledge imprint, omits entire journals, largely in the humanities and social sciences, from the subscription packages it sells in the PRC.⁶⁶ Refinitiv, a global financial information provider, uses an automated filtering system to prevent PRC subscribers from accessing content that paints Beijing in an unfavorable light.⁶⁷

The PRC projects its censorship into foreign information markets through many of the same channels. For instance, well-funded PRC institutions subsidize the publication of an array of "internationally refereed academic journals" by prestigious foreign presses that effectively globalize PRC narratives for an English-speaking audience, with CCP authorities holding fast to editorial control.⁶⁸ The results are predictable. In one notorious 2019 example, the PRC partner clumsily censored an entire article from one such journal while it was in production, and the U.S.-based editor not only declined to intercede but also rationalized the deletion.⁶⁹ In another, more subtle example, a European publisher permitted its PRC partner to preselect the pool of contributing authors for a series of edited volumes, thereby subjecting the entire project to the constraints of Chinese censorship, while artfully camouflaging that maneuver behind the legitimating façade of its own storied imprint and a stable of reputable foreign editors. In 2016, the American Bar Association (ABA) rescinded an offer to publish a book in the United States by the exiled human rights lawyer Teng Biao, reportedly out of concern that the book would upset the PRC government, make ABA activities in the PRC more difficult, and put ABA staff in the country at risk.⁷⁰

So-called lawfare, using legal tools to wage political battles, is an increasingly prominent strategy among authoritarians attempting to subvert liberal values from the inside, especially in jurisdictions that follow British legal norms. For instance, political figures in Singapore have long resorted to libel actions to silence and intimidate critics, including international media organizations such as the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and the *Financial Times*. In 2006, the country banned the *Far Eastern Economic Review* for an article that extensively quoted an opposition politician's critical remarks about the government.⁷¹ In 2014, Penguin withdrew an academic book that it had already published from the Indian market rather than defend itself in court against charges that the book was offensive to Hindus.⁷² The book later reappeared under the imprint of another publisher. In the same year, CUP declined to publish a book by the late Russia expert Karen Dawisha that documented how Vladimir Putin's inner circle had accumulated immense wealth and power. A letter from CUP explained that it had no appetite for the "disruption and expense" of libel suits that might result from publishing her book.⁷³ In 2017, Allen & Unwin cited similar grounds for canceling its publication of *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia*, a book by Clive Hamilton that detailed PRC influence on media and politics in Australia.⁷⁴ More recently, a Taiwanese media group friendly to Beijing filed a libel action against a journalist from the

Financial Times who reported on alleged PRC meddling in the editorial division of a Taiwanese daily newspaper.⁷⁵ And in France, Huawei filed defamation suits against a respected think tank scholar, a broadcast journalist, and a wireless networking expert over claims that the telecommunications firm is controlled by the PRC government and is involved in acts of espionage.⁷⁶

Authoritarian regimes are using technology as a devastating force multiplier. The PRC is widely reputed to operate the most sophisticated regime of online surveillance and censorship on the planet, and it is exporting this model as a full-stack service to interested governments, financed in part with Chinese loans.⁷⁷ While its efforts to restrict free expression in the present are legion, its attempts to manipulate the historical record in order to control posterity are less well-known. Its reach extends deep into the specialized databases and online publication archives used by scholars of China around the world, allowing it to erase inconvenient facts, stealthily globalize its own preferred narratives, and subvert the integrity of intellectual inquiry nearly everywhere. Artificial intelligence promises to automate such campaigns at colossal scales and efficiencies, further enslaving our information space and our perceptions to the whims of the powerful.⁷⁸

LESSONS LEARNED AND WAYS FORWARD

Engagement with authoritarian partners was never going to be a one-way street, and the failure to anticipate and adequately prepare for the foreseeable ways in which they might advance their own interests at our expense was a blunder born of hubris. Over time, a succession of discrete decisions and compromises, often made with good intentions, to facilitate this undertaking or smooth that wrinkle, has finally accumulated into a systemic hazard that is testing the character of free intellectual inquiry in the places that profess to value it most.

Yet it is within our power to recover from this predicament if we can muster the requisite focus, fortitude, and unity of purpose. That is where we should direct our energies first. If authoritarian partners are transforming or compromising the institutions of our knowledge economy from within, then it is in large measure because we have fecklessly permitted them to. Their influence and interference are seeping into the cracks opened by marketization, technological disruption, and inequality, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened our vulnerability. It is incumbent upon us to attend to that promptly. Intellectual freedom flourishes only so long as we sustain and invest in the ecosystem that supports it, and that ecosystem is prone to exploitation and despoilment by those with incompatible agendas. A tragedy of the commons awaits if we cannot strike a better balance between narrow, short-term self-interest and the long-term stakes for all.

In the past year, a chorus of responses has risen from democracies that are now galvanized into action, and a tiered strategy is beginning to emerge.⁷⁹

The first level entails **exhaustive organizational reform**, especially renewed emphasis on staff training, data collection and reporting, compliance cultures, and the prevention of conflicts of commitment and interest. To shepherd that reform, governments must raise standards, close loopholes, and dispel crippling ambiguities in their regulatory regimes.⁸⁰

Once those supports are in place, institutions can then move to the next level: **seizing the initiative in negotiations** on potential partnerships. This means sitting at the bargaining table only after a robust internal process has run its course, including deep research into the backgrounds of would-be partners; systematic thinking about the concrete goals, values, and interests implicated in a potential collaboration; rigorous evaluation of costs and benefits; and adoption of necessary precautions or safeguards. Formal processes that incorporate individuals with special competencies who can read beyond the four corners of a gift, grant, or contract are essential to conducting such due diligence reviews. In many instances, drawing in the relevant expertise will require breaking down the separation between development and business operations on the one hand, and country, subject matter, or editorial specialists on the other.

Because the way a foreign partner conducts itself at home is indicative of its intentions abroad, institutions with authoritarian exposure must **prepare contingency plans** for a menu of unpalatable events, including the detention of personnel, the censorship of publications, the theft of intellectual property, the incitement of campus protests, or the abrupt cancelation or closure of programs.

In addition to defending the perimeter, our knowledge institutions must also strengthen their cores. Universities in particular must **reduce exposure to financial coercion** by diversifying the sources of their income. Governments can help campuses pare back their dependence on international students and donors by increasing state support, and campuses must hedge against targeted disruptions by expanding the range of countries that they draw students and revenue from.

Experience counsels that **solidarity among scholars and institutions** is often weak, which subverts their bargaining power and exposes them to predatory brinkmanship and intimidation. In a decentralized, lightly regulated, and competitive marketplace, many behave as opportunistic free agents, entrepreneurially chasing the most gainful deals that they can find. Collective action problems, free riding, and failures of even elementary risk management and due diligence abound.

The academic and publishing sectors must seize the opportunity to **self-police better** before governments step in with blunt legislative and regulatory solutions. This will demand discipline and a shared sense of mission. Acting internally and through learned societies and professional organizations, knowledge workers and their employers must institutionalize procedures and **build mechanisms for collective security** to prevent foreign partners from using divide-and-rule tactics or forum shopping to break their resolve and encourage a race to the bottom. They should, for example, stand together if one of their number is threatened or punished for upholding intellectual independence and integrity, if a colleague in good standing is denied a visa, or if the terms of a going venture are altered unilaterally. They must adopt clear duty-of-care standards toward traveling affiliates, and provide information and training to prevent, reduce, and manage overseas risk.⁸¹ They must also cultivate internal and sectoral systems for shared learning, educate personnel and foreign visitors on minimum local standards of conduct, establish clear rules concerning the funding of activities and groups, and enforce the right of every member of their community to be free from intimidation.

Furthermore, authors, journals, learned societies, and publishers must **develop detailed best practices** and then stipulate them in contracts so that localized instances of censorship are handled ethically and transparently in ways that account for the interests of all parties. They should simply refuse on principle to participate in or accede to any attempts to control or censor content extraterritorially, regardless of what guise these might take. Knowledge institutions must insist on broad reciprocity with their foreign partners regarding personnel, flows of information, and research access to correct the asymmetries that pervade current engagements; and crucially, they must be prepared to throttle back or suspend those engagements to achieve it.

These are attainable goals, but they require a difficult change in mindset equal to our changed environment. Fortunately, bodies as diverse as Human Rights Watch, the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, the National Science Foundation, and an Australian University Foreign Interference Taskforce have seeded this transformation, and it now falls to the broader community of those concerned with upholding free intellectual inquiry to consolidate, enrich, and elaborate upon these initial contributions.⁸² Together we face the duty and opportunity to rededicate ourselves to first principles at a time when liberal democracy and the institutions that support it are acutely in need of renewal. This is a trial that we must pass, and we will emerge stronger for it.

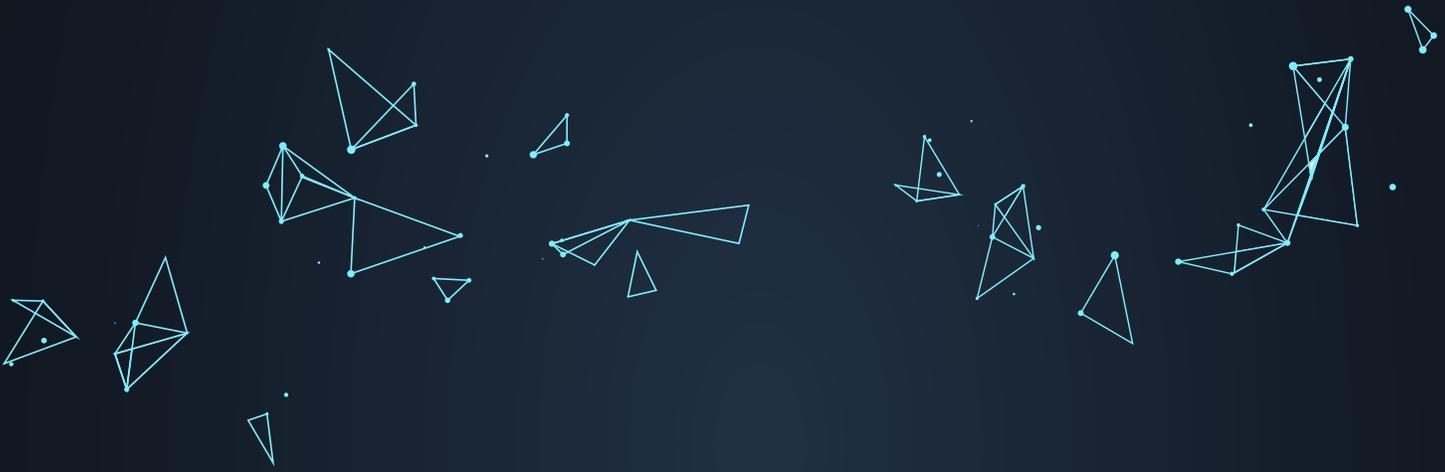
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