

Digital Authoritarianism

Subjects: **Communication**

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Digital authoritarianism describes a specific mode of governing in which autocratic rule is exercised and enhanced largely through the aid of digital technologies.

digital society

public management

toxic leadership

authoritarianism

media ecology

1. Overview

Digital authoritarianism has been studied in two distinct though potentially related contexts: state governing and organizational leadership. As initially conceived, digital authoritarianism referred chiefly to governments or state actors who exercised autocratic rule by using digital technologies to manipulate and control populations. This typically involves two forms of control: (1) censorship — regulating and, thus, limiting what information citizens are exposed to and (2) surveillance — tracking citizens and their activities using digital technologies.

More recently, Brian L. Ott and Carrisa S. Hoelscher have adapted the concept of digital authoritarianism to account for a series of changing leadership dynamics in corporate or organizational settings. For them, digital authoritarianism describes a set of management practices that replicate and perpetuate the logic of digital computing. In this context, digital authoritarianism refers not to the way governments or state actors use digital technologies to manipulate and control their citizens but to the way digital technologies extend their logics into modern workplaces by influencing the habits of mind and behavioral practices of corporate leaders and managers.

In both governmental and organizational contexts, digital authoritarianism threatens democratic norms, principles, and institutions. The present encyclopedia entry focuses on digital authoritarianism in the organizational context by unpacking Ott and Hoelscher's argument. They contend that digital authoritarianism, as enacted by some corporate leaders, reflects many of the personality traits and management practices typical of toxic leadership. But these traits and practices are subsumed to the logics of digital media, which include publicity, intransigence, impertinence, and impulsivity. Specifically, they maintain that digital authoritarianism is a unique combination of: (1) the destructive behaviors and dysfunctional psychological traits of toxic leaders; (2) the ideology of authoritarianism; and (3) the underlying structural logics of digital technologies.

To support their argument, they undertake a case study of Elon Musk's takeover and leadership of Twitter, which has since been rebranded as "X." They selected Elon Musk because, as a CEO who regularly makes and communicates his management decisions on social media, he offers a particularly clear example of corporate leadership that is highly public. Their approach to studying Elon Musk's public management of Twitter is rooted in

the perspective of media ecology, which suggests that the prevailing media forms (or technologies of communication) in society significantly shape the culture, communication, and consciousness of that society.

2. Digital Authoritarianism in Organizational Contexts

While the concept of toxic leadership is not new, Ott and Hoelscher argue it is evolving in our digital world. So, it is helpful to review the history of this concept. The political scientist Marcia Wicker introduced the phrase "toxic leader" in 1996 ^[1], though Jean Lipman-Blumen helped to popularize it in her 2004 book, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*. Lipman-Blumen defines toxic leadership as, "a process in which leaders, by dint of their destructive behavior and/or dysfunctional personal[ity] characteristics inflict serious and enduring harm on their followers, their organizations, and non-followers, alike" ^[2] (p. 36). Asha Bhandarker and Snigdha Rai have further observed, a "leader can be considered toxic if [their followers are] physically or psychologically harmed by the leader's actions and it creates long-lasting impairment in the subordinates" ^[3] (p. 66).

Some of the key destructive behaviors in which toxic leaders engage include misleading, lying, undermining, stifling, silencing, demeaning, demoralizing, bullying, intimidating, coercing, marginalizing, scapegoating, disenfranchising, and favoring. In addition to these behaviors, toxic leaders also exhibit a series of related dysfunctional behavioral traits, including insatiable ambition, narcissism, self-aggrandizement, arrogance, and a lack of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, transparency, empathy, and self-reflection.

Summarizing these behaviors and personality traits, Birol Başkan writes, "There are three critical elements of this destructive style of leadership: an apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates, a personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects the organizational climate, and a belief by subordinates that the superior is motivated primarily by self-interest" ^[4] (p. 98). Inasmuch as all these elements run counter to prevailing understandings of effective leadership, toxic leadership can be understood as incompetent leadership combined with abuse.

Due to the deficit of leadership behaviors associated with toxic leadership, toxic leaders lean heavily on authority to achieve their aims, which partially explains why toxic leaders are prone to authoritarianism. While some scholars regard authoritarianism as its own style of leadership, Ott and Hoelscher posit that it is better understood as a mode of ruling rather than leading. Authoritarians, by definition, exert absolute authority and control and demand unconditional obedience. Leaders, by contrast, do not exercise absolute authority. Indeed, toxic leaders typically do not embody all the destructive behaviors and dysfunctional personality traits of toxic leadership or enact them in all contexts, though the more of these traits a leader possesses and the more routinely they are enacted, the more authoritarian that leader is likely to be.

While authoritarianism shares commonalities with toxic leadership, as well as other recognized styles of destructive leadership, its central concern with rulership rather than leadership makes it distinctive. Because authoritarianism is premised on centralized power, authoritarian rulers often have limited or no accountability. In short, they are

neither responsible for their decisions nor accountable for their actions. They also exercise far greater control over the flow of information, often eliminating any possibility for discussion, let alone dissent.

3. The Lens of Media Ecology

Ott and Hoelscher maintain that toxic leadership is evolving in the direction of authoritarianism. To understand why and how this is happening, they turn to media ecology. The central premise of media ecology is that communication technologies are not merely tools in the social environment, but constitute the very social environment we inhabit, thereby conditioning our habits of mind. Media ecologists posit that the prevailing technologies of communication—the media forms that dominate at a given historical moment—shape and influence not so much *what* we know (i.e., our attitudes and beliefs about the world), but *how* we know (i.e., the way we process information and make sense of the world).

All media forms are designed and engineered to operate in particular ways. Consequently, they have relatively distinct and fixed structural traits. Repeated exposure to these structural traits or biases conditions human thought and its expression. In a digital world, media have three defining structural traits: digitality, algorithmic execution, and efficiency. These traits, in turn, foster the logics of intransigence, impertinence, and impulsivity. To these logics, Ott and Hoelscher have added a fourth: publicity.

4. Analysis of Elon Musk's Public Leadership

Turning to Elon Musk's leadership of Twitter, Ott and Hoelscher illustrate the operation of each of the four digital logics by drawing on news media accounts of Musk's management practices and analysis of his tweets. With respect to the digital logic of publicity, which Ott and Hoelscher suggest is the master logic of a digital world, they demonstrate that Elon Musk regularly both seeks an audience for his management decisions by tweeting (about) them and makes decisions that will further attract attention. With regard to intransigence, they highlight the overly simplistic and reductionistic character of Elon Musk's management decisions. Shifting to impertinence, they draw attention to the often insensitive and uncaring nature of his management practices. Finally, they document a history of erratic and unpredictable decision-making related to affect-driven impulsivity. In sum, these logics add up to a management practice that is highly authoritarian, meaning that it treats employees as subjects to be ruled rather than as collaborators and team members to be led.

5. Conclusions

Based on their analysis of Elon Musk's public leadership of Twitter, Ott and Hoelscher draw three main conclusions. First, they suggest that continuing to treat authoritarianism as a valid and legitimate style of leadership in academic research may be misguided and dangerous. Second, they reflect on the value of using media ecology to continue investigating management practices and organizational cultures. Third, they highlight the profoundly negative consequences of digital authoritarianism in organizational settings for individuals, institutions, and society.

References

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