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Technology and the Uighur Crisis

Uighurs living in Xingjian, China are undeniably oppressed and suffer gross violations of human rights. This persecution by the Chinese government is enabled by the use of technology in monitoring and control. Though the threat of state sponsored surveillance is not a foreign concept in China, it is uniquely intrusive and dehumanizing for the Uighur population. Eleven million Uighurs in China are coerced into submitting to large-scale data collection and monitoring, while 30% of the population made up of ethnic Han are generally exempt. In examining the situation in Xingjian, one may wonder: why is this crisis of a technological nature and how have both the Chinese government and the Uighurs leveraged technology to support their respective causes?

Technology's pervasive reach has allowed for monitoring all aspects of Uighur life on a large scale in an attempt to stamp out Uighur religion, language, and culture. However, these attempts at cultural homogeneity through fear and control are largely a xenophobic response to the flourishing of Uighur identity that resulted from an increase in access to technology such as smartphones and social media. Technology has not just been a tool wielded to quash Uighur identity in this crisis, and today it also informs the ways in which many Uighurs are choosing to challenge the Chinese Government, providing a glimpse of hope in an otherwise desperate situation. Technology in this crisis has proven to have the power of supporting or suppressing identity in its collective and individual forms.

The Uighurs comprise the Muslim minority of China, living primarily in an area of northwest China called Xinjiang. The region was brought into China in 1949 and threatened by the prospect of an Uighur struggle for autonomy and independence, the Chinese government encouraged large numbers of Han Chinese to migrate there and aid in their attempts for forced assimilation into mainstream Chinese culture. Tensions between ethnic groups came to a head in conflicts, often resulting in police crackdowns, culminating in 2009, when they escalated to bloody ethnic riots.

The Chinese government responded with an internet blackout and cutting all service for ten months. Twitter and Facebook were banned and replaced with Chinese platforms, including the launching of WeChat, which was monitored but unrestricted in its first year. By 2014 smartphones were ubiquitous in the area. This provided Uighurs with access to a larger online community, and widespread reconnecting with Islam in a way that was previously impossible given prohibitions by the Chinese government. This forging of identity through faith and language online was seen as threatening to the Chinese government, who saw an opportunity to leverage this increased activity on social media to serve as means of monitoring the population and pushing for the suppression of Uighur identity they had sought since their induction into China.

Beginning with the close monitoring WeChat, the Uighur population has continued to be essentially under constant surveillance. Contact from a non-Chinese number could result in arrest, leading to the alienation of many Uighurs from their family members and friends who

have sought refuge in other nations. This tightly controlled network of surveillance is far reaching and impacts Uighurs around the world, partially in an attempt to undermine their prior sense of community awarded by technology.

Take, for example, the story of a young woman named Atawula whose husband began to be harassed by police after he was contacted by friends in Turkey. To avoid being detained she and her husband planned to leave Xingjian for Turkey with their children, and she went a few days early while her husband waited for their children's passports. He was brought to a detention center the day she left, and upon her arrival all of her friends and relatives in China deleted her on Wechat to preserve their safety. To date, she has no contact with her former life and no knowledge of her children due to the fear that the Chinese government has instilled in the Uighur population. This is an example of one of the many ways that the Chinese government has used technology to erase the distinct Uighur community.

Disturbing as this surveillance is, it goes well beyond messaging apps. Uighurs are forced to download other apps which monitor cell phone content, are tracked via GPS devices installed in their vehicles, are required to scan their ID card when making many purchases, and are subjected to stop and cooperate at thousands of police checkpoints in the area. Police checkpoints entail handing over one's phone to be swept, providing information for police to enter into a data-collection app, and swiping one's identity card. This system enables behaviors considered "suspicious" to be spotted, leading to triggering of alarms, police follow-ups, and a general instillation of fear. This fear compels Uighurs to distance themselves from practicing their religion and speaking their language, as well as engaging in any behaviors that may set them apart or draw attention to them in both their public and personal lives.

These are clear violations of privacy by way complete surveillance and are only made possible through technology. Not only does the fear of constant monitoring contribute to the destruction of Uighur identity and instill widespread fear, but the Chinese government exploits this collected data to detain over a million Uighur individuals in concentration camps. Within these "reeducation camps" they face physical and mental torture, are forced to study and praise the Chinese government as well as renounce Islam, and in some cases are killed. Uighurs are reduced to their identification number and brought to inhumane lengths in order to force their assimilation and loss of individuality as well as sense of community. No official records or statistics exist, but a database of testimonies of Uighurs reporting missing relatives has shed light on the astonishing number of individuals subjected to these conditions.

Technology was crucial to identity forming and Uighur community building and is now paramount in their oppression and forced assimilation by means of large-scale total surveillance and control. However, there is a third layer in the complex relationship between the Uighurs, the Chinese government, and their respective uses of technology. Recently, a digital revolution has taken place in which Uighurs who have managed to flee from China are using technology in an attempt to improve the situation in Xinjiang.

Some have begun to record testimony videos on smartphones are share them to YouTube, twitter and Facebook, over time becoming bolder and showing their faces and expose their identities while demanding attention on the world stage. Others have used social media to draw attention to their specific imprisoned family members. The public nature of these appeals has put pressure on the Chinese government, and in some cases, they have reacted and freed the imprisoned individuals mentioned within 24 hours. In this case, exposure and individuality

are tools to fight back, serving a stark contrast to China's intended homogenizing effect of technology.

Large WhatsApp news groups connecting Uighurs separated by an international diaspora have also served as a source of community and solidarity, as well as provided information about their homes and families. Live updates and videos are made available, which can provide crucial insight into the circumstances of loved ones. For example, one woman watching a video of children playing noticed her daughter in the corner of the frame laughing, which served as the only piece of evidence to indicate that the young girl was still alive. In using technology to rebuild community and collective identity, Uighurs have [begun to take back](#) what crackdowns in Xingjian have preciously stolen from them.

This crisis operates as an example of the incredibly complicated relationship between authoritarian control, identity, and technology. Technology empowers the Chinese government to amass huge quantities of data on Uighur citizens in order to stamp out Uighur culture, community, identity, while at the same time allowing Uighurs to claim their individual and collective identities as a form of dissent. Technology has the power wipe out the very things that make us human: shared community and personal identity, but it may also have the power to uplift these concepts provide hope in a dystopian surveillance state.