Social Media In/After Neoliberalism:

Mapping Changing Attitudes toward Platforms at the Milton Wolf Seminar

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Introduction

As the air of Cold War triumphalism receded in the 2000s, many seasoned and sophisticated Western policymakers imbued the internet with near magical qualities. Where the organs of public policy had atrophied into clunky, pondering bureaucracies, the entrepreneurial zest and "move fast and break things" ethos of Silicon Valley would help get things done. In the far-flung corners of the world where liberal democracy had not yet taken hold, social media would topple dictators and tyrants. Today, however, politicians routinely assign primary responsibility to social media for the debasement of political discourse, the atomization of social life, and all manner of other ills. The elite consensus on social media has collapsed.

In this report, I map the transformation of the dominant understanding of the impact of social media on democracy. To do so, I plumb the history of the Milton Wolf Seminar on Media and Diplomacy, an annual conference held in Vienna that is dedicated to the exploration of developing issues in diplomacy and journalism. Originally organized by media scholar Monroe Price in 2001, today the seminar operates as a collaboration between the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, the American Austrian Foundation, the Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation, and the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna. The seminar brings together academics, policymakers, diplomats, representatives from the tech industry, journalists, NGO professionals, and graduate students from schools such as the University of Pennsylvania, Georgetown, and Oxford University. That is to say, seminar participants generally hail from relatively privileged institutions. The Milton Wolf Seminar thus offers a generative vantage point from which to survey the evolution of elite attitudes toward technology over the last decade.

To grasp the various dimensions of this change, I analyzed seminar overviews, panel descriptions, and blog posts written by emerging scholars since 2010. I also conducted semi-

structured interviews with the organizers of the seminar to divine a deeper sense of its history. Finally, as a participant in the 2023 Milton Wolf Seminar—the first gathering since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—I attended panels, spoke with presenters, and liaised with emerging scholars.

Based on this research, I argue that seminar attendees in the early 2010s generally saw social media platforms as a beacon of liberal internationalism. In line with neoliberal imaginings of a flat, frictionless world, social media were perceived as natural adversaries of entrenched political and economic hierarchies. In contrast, more recent seminars have emphasized the structural challenges posed to democracies by platforms. As we approach a "post-neoliberal" moment in global governance, this year's seminar featured renewed calls for state regulation of social media companies to mitigate the various threats posed to the international order by platforms.

The Silicon Valley Consensus: Social Media at the End of History

Amidst the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama triumphantly proclaimed in 1989 that humanity had arrived at the "end of history." The grand political debates that littered the twentieth century—what is the most just system of economic production? What is the ideal form of government? —were declared to be over. For many members of the Western intelligentsia, the advent of liberal democracy signaled the denouement of humanity's political evolution. Fascism, communism, and Islamic fundamentalism were but the final throes of the historical clash of ideologies in the universal march towards liberal capitalism. As Fukuyama reasoned, "for a very large part of the world, there is now no ideology with pretensions to universality that is in a position to challenge liberal democracy," (1992, 45).

Yet, history kept on happening. Authoritarian states such as China embraced capitalism without the trappings of political liberalism. Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that bloody land wars are not just relics of Europe's past. And even many liberal democracies are undergoing a process of democratic backsliding. The End of History thesis has thus revealed itself to be a historically specific ideology, an apparition that surfaced for a flickering moment of unchallenged American hegemony in international affairs and relative equanimity between capital and the democracy at home.

Today, Western pundits and policymakers expend far less time musing about the democratic prospects of China, India, and other nations in the Global South, and far more dedicated to whether the West itself can sustain democracy. There is diminishing public faith that those in government deserve their power or that they can solve the myriad structural problems besetting liberal democracy, from surging income inequality to impending climate catastrophe.

However, Silicon Valley buoyed the rapidly deteriorating status quo. The late 2000s and early 2010s gave rise to what we might call the Silicon Valley consensus, the ideology that commercial social media tools developed in the West can advance Western diplomatic and public policy goals better than policymakers themselves. From democracy promotion to economic development, what could not be accomplished through public policy could be pursed through technological innovation. The Silicon Valley consensus injected vim and vigor into an otherwise staid and sclerotic system of global governance, positioning Facebook and Google as the vanguard of liberal democracy. As media scholar Burcu Baykurt reflects, the global internet "infused an engineering project with ideals of democracy, connectivity, and the promise of innovation and international markets," (2022, 5).

Many participants at early Milton Wolf Seminars hewed closely to the dominant paradigm regarding the impact of social media on democracy. There was an overriding—though by no means unanimous—belief that social media worked in harmony with the policy and diplomatic goals of Western democracies. In the remainder of this section, I explore several key themes animating the Silicon Valley consensus that permeated the Milton Wolf Seminar during the early 2010s.

The Great Flattening: Horizontalist Imaginings and Dreams of Democratization

The years immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall gave rise to a panoply of arguments regarding the nature of power in globalization. Radicals, reformers, and institutionalists alike converged on the notion that the twenty first century would be one of networks rather than hierarchies, decentralization rather than bureaucratic planning, and popular participation rather than top-down institutional mediation. At early Milton Wolf Seminars, this line of thinking had its corollary in the millenarian contention that the structure of the internet was flatter and more egalitarian than the mass media hierarchies of the late twentieth century.

Traditionally, newspaper editors, television producers, and other media gatekeepers carefully delimited access to the public sphere, determining which news stories, voices, and viewpoints could reach their audiences. So too did political elites shape the flow of information through intellectual copyright law, libel law, providing or denying access to reporters, and—in authoritarian contexts—issuing explicit edicts about what media outlets could and could not publish. In contrast, social media were widely thought to empower social movements, dissidents, and other voices normally sidelined by the mass media to speak directly to the public. With the advent and large-scale adoption of social networking tools, everybody with a social media

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account could be a producer or disseminator of news, sweeping the media gatekeepers of yore into the proverbial dustbin of history. Nour Halabi (2013), a former Milton Wolf emerging scholar, argued: "new media is expanding the international democratic public sphere in the Habermasian sense." Another emerging scholar reflected:

> Organizational websites, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are among the many interfaces that allow media actors to bypass traditional delivery platforms and bring their analyses and reports directly to consumers. The internet's ability to foster direct and instantaneous communication without governmental filters and editorial pressures is undoubtedly an important factor in increasing the media's influence in our daily lives. (Iyengar 2012)

Social media were endowed with a populist verve, providing an open, decentralized medium for seemingly unfiltered and unfettered expression outside the long arm of traditional gatekeeping authorities.

In regions of the world living under autocratic rule, Western technology was often cast as a liberator. Social media platforms were assigned preternatural and autonomous power to decisively bend the arch of history toward Western-style democracy, converting authoritarian, non-liberal states into liberal ones. Once citizens of authoritarian countries acquired access to the internet, authoritarian governments would lose their monopoly over information as those outside of state-controlled institutions rushed to make their voices heard to the public through blogs, tweets, and Facebook posts. As one Milton Wolf emerging scholar argued: "Bloggers and other forms of citizen journalism are challenging autocratic regimes in ways traditional journalists cannot. Citizen journalists have become the main proponents of free speech in many repressive countries around the world," (Rae 2015). Given enough gadgets and connectivity, authoritarianism would eventually become unsustainable.

Platforms as Engines of Democracy

In addition to eroding authoritarian power structures, many seminar participants focused on the role of social media as a novel means of political mobilization for democratic movements. While the old ways of doing politics was driven by hierarchies, leaders, and rules, social media allowed individuals to organize without centralized coordinating structures such as political parties and social movement organizations. Social media occupied a central role in discussions of the Arab Spring, not merely as useful tools for protestors and activists, but as motivating causes of these movements. Some participants linked the purportedly decentralized structure of social media networks to the horizontal, "leaderless" organizational structure of social movements in the early 2010s. As the 2023 Milton Wolf Seminar description noted:

> Early Seminars in 2010 and 2011 coincided with a global wave of protests and "Twitter revolutions," including the "Arab Spring" and Occupy Wall Street. Conversations heralded the dawn of a new more equitable global media system built upon platforms that promised to "do no evil."

Briar Smith, an organizer of the Milton Wolf seminar since 2010, similarly reflected: "there was a golden age around 2012, and people were much more optimistic about where things could have gone."

Social media platforms were not analyzed solely as tools of liberation at early Milton Wolf Seminars—though rosy assessments of how social media shaped politics tended to outpace more cautious appraisals. Certain participants did attend to the harms perpetrated by repressive governments and other nefarious actors through the internet. However, these harms were generally depicted as *external* to the internet, as a corruption of the internet's essential inner logic, a betrayal of the web's open, decentralized spirit and structure.

From Government to Governance: The Privatization of Public Policy

At the beginning of the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar, Hans Winkler, the director of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, posed the question, "Has the Westphalian notion of sovereignty disappeared?" Though participants rejected the once fashionable claim that international financial institutions and global governance regimes had neatly usurped the sovereignty of nation-states, there was a consensus that globalization precipitated a devolution of state power from centralized governments to new forms of more distributed, networked governance. The top-down policymaking paradigms that were developed to regulate print and broadcast media during the twentieth century were no longer equipped to deal with a technology as decentralized and global as the internet. As one participant averred: "conventional discussions of international relations typically focus on traditional categories of states and citizens. In this seminar, we were invited to consider how changing international communications practices create a more complex global political environment governed by many different types of players," (Peres-Neto 2015). Multilateral coordination, it was argued, could obviate the need for a central decision-making authority.

Discussions of media regulation at Milton Wolf generally focused on multistakeholder approaches to regulating internet infrastructure, including IP addresses, data transmission protocols such as TCP/ IP and HTTP, and root servers. While traditional regulatory paradigms are premised on governance of media and telecommunications firms by state-based lawmakers, multistakeholder approaches involve the coordination of private-sector and non-profit actors with government authorities—often across national boundaries. In summarizing the panel "Locating Internet Governance in the Diplomatic Machinery," emerging scholar Ryan Spagnolo (2014) noted that:

> The panelists agreed on the need for greater transparency in internet governance
> decision-making processes and the need to include governments, industry (the

technology corporations), and civil society (technology users as rights holders). The reticence of governments to include non-state actors–namely, businesses and civil society–in the policy formulation process reflects the greater challenge of successfully integrating multi-stakeholder involvement in internet governance.

Because multistakeholder governance brings industry into the policymaking fold, it is often considered a "light touch" approach to regulating internet companies. Rather than confront the tech industry as adversaries, multistakeholder models seek to arrive at consensus between the regulator and the regulated, as well as other interested parties. For instance, in the context of the Marco Civil project in Brazil, media scholar Wolfgang Schulz (2014) suggested that lawmakers charged with drafting internet policy should: "anticipate the effects different solutions for a regulatory problem can have in different fields of society, in this case especially regarding free speech and economic innovation." Further, Schulz advised lawmakers to consider: "What are the most likely reactions of multi-national providers facing regulation?" The assumption that regulators ought to govern according to market considerations—to prioritize the potential impact of public policy on private sector innovation—evinces a neoliberal political rationality in which the public good is not so much subordinated to the market but collapsed into it.

Though participants expressed various critiques of multistakeholder approaches to internet governance in practice—particularly the lack of representation of non-Western countries in many multistakeholder forums, as well as the outsized influence of certain stakeholders over others in groups like ICANN—the underlying principle that governments should work in collaboration with industry and civil society was generally upheld. Indeed, the multistakeholder model is embedded into the very fabric of the Milton Wolf Seminar. Monroe Price explained that one of his primary motivations for organizing the seminar was to:

> encourage the idea of having government, the academy, and private industry at the same table. That was always a goal. And this came out of the kind of coalition approach of the 1960s and 70s. It came out of the Aspen Institute, their way of

organizing a roundtable with scholars, enterprise, and government speaking to each other.

While seminar participants countenanced a measured, circumscribed role for the state in the regulation of internet infrastructure, there was even less enthusiasm for government regulation of online content. Seminar organizer Amelia Arsenault explained:

> There's always been an appetite for some regulation [at the Milton Wolf Seminar]. TCP/IP—the agreement to use the same internet language—was an active government regulation. Governments had to step up and actually enforce that, or you wouldn't have the internet that we have today. At the infrastructure layer, I don't think that there was that fear of government regulation. It was only fear of government regulation that would inhibit that content layer of the internet.[1]

Robust government regulation of internet content—including websites, platforms, and applications—was generally only discussed in authoritarian contexts such as China and Russia, in which governments acted to stifle the speech rights of their citizens. Internet freedom was broadly interpreted as freedom from the state, realized in the absence of government interference. An affirmative vision of regulation at the content layer of the internet was still inchoate.

The Hidden Valley: On the Obfuscation of Political Economy

There was scant discussion of the political economy of social media platforms during the Milton Wolf Seminars of the early 2010s. Panelists tended to focus far more on threats to internet freedom emanating from governments than from large internet companies in Silicon Valley. As emerging scholar Leshuo Dong (2012) reflected: "corporate control was not as big a focal point during the seminar."

At early Milton Wolf Seminars, social media were generally depicted as tools of connectivity rather than as sites of control. Participants foregrounded how social movements and

dissidents in the Global South creatively harnessed social media platforms to organize, mobilize, and influence public opinion. The likes of Facebook and Twitter were analyzed primarily as networks facilitating user-to-user interaction—as disinterested intermediaries—rather than as corporations seeking profit. Indeed, issues related to these companies' business models, ownership structure, surveillance practices, and corporate governance procedures all garnered short shrift. The neglect of the political economy of platforms at Milton Wolf therefore contributed to horizontalist imaginings of social media as decentralized, democratizing, and generally liberatory technologies operating outside of hierarchal state and market relations.

In eliding the structural roots of social media platforms, the Western provenance of social media platforms also faded from view at Milton Wolf. Panglossian understandings of the internet as a global, deterritorialized network outpaced grounded analyses of the embeddedness of the internet in the American military-industrial complex and Cold War geopolitics. The prevailing emphasis on the transformative role of Western technologies in catalyzing social media revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa neglected the longer histories of Western domination of the region's media systems.

Whither the Silicon Valley Consensus?: Social Media at the End of Neoliberalism

The last decade has demonstrated that we are not at the end of history, but the end of neoliberalism as the hegemonic governing ideology. The core neoliberal claim that the economy would flourish once governments got out of the way is now under assail from across the political spectrum. Populist upheavals on the political left and right have challenged the dominance of unelected technocrats and neoliberal institutions such as central banks. Industrial policy is now ubiquitous throughout developed and developing economies alike. And even longstanding

bastions of neoliberal economic thought such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and *The Economist* now extol the need for a new policy paradigm to replace neoliberalism. Whom amongst us still clings to the conceit that free markets are a guarantor of economic growth, let alone a liberal political order? As *Guardian* diplomatic editor Patrick Wintour quipped at this year's seminar: "political faith in free trade as a means to change authoritarian regimes is dead. Change through trade has failed, blown up a bit like the Nord Stream pipelines."

As we enter this post-neoliberal moment in global governance, the hegemonic consensus regarding the democratizing power of social networks has also been shattered. From Facebook's Cambridge Analytica scandal to the circulation of political disinformation on Twitter, it is now evident that the commercial interests of social media corporations and the public's interest in an open, empowering internet are not aligned. While academics and policymakers were once inclined to interpret assertions of state sovereignty over the internet as an exercise in authoritarianism, today there is growing belief that social media pose significant policy problems that necessitate concerted policy responses from governments.

Although previous Milton Wolf Seminars focused on the challenge posed to authoritarian governments by social media, much of this year's seminar focused on the threats posed by social media to democratic governments, as well as to groups striving for reform within authoritarian countries. Some participants advanced a functionalist conviction that government regulation was necessary to protect the institutions of liberal democracy from platform giants. Others sought to reform Silicon Valley not to shore up the current geopolitical order but to create a more just, equitable, and democratic media system. Although this year's participants advanced many different rationales for regulating platforms, they generally converged on the belief that there ought to be a much more robust role for the state in internet governance.

Rethinking Gatekeeping Power in a Platform Age

While early Milton Wolf attendees tended to laud the internet's openness, this year's participants gestured toward new modes of enclosure associated with the growing power of social media platforms over public communication. Against the cyberutopian claim that social networks are more democratic and less centralized than traditional media hierarchies, Des Freedman suggested that the power of social media algorithms is analogous to that of newspaper editors and television owners. In this reading, digital platforms do not undermine traditional gatekeepers but instead constitute a new class of gatekeepers that systematically degrade and distort the public sphere.

Participants this year voiced concerns regarding the tendency of social media platforms and search engines to fracture the public rather than to connect and empower it. As social media feeds and search engine results become the primary mode of discovering information online, algorithmic personalization has fragmented the public sphere by pushing democratic publics into individualized siloes and minimizing their exposure to diverse points of view. Barry Lynn noted that the platformization of the public sphere has led "not to post-truth, but the atomization of truth." In a media ecosystem in which personalized algorithms calculate which news stories surface to the top of each user's feed, there are "eight billion forms of truth" in circulation across the globe corresponding to every individual's own ideological predilection, worldview, and cultural sensibility.

The colonization of the public sphere by platforms has not only reshaped how media is consumed, but also how it is produced. Patrick Wintour averred that the dependency of publishers on platforms to reach the public ultimately compromises the civic potential of

journalism. He argued that algorithms elaborate an incentive structure that is often inconsistent with the civic ideals of journalism. To illustrate the tension between the civic mission of journalism and the algorithmic priorities of social media platforms, Wintour relayed statistics about the massive disparity in social media engagement between a viral article that one of his colleagues penned about female orgasms and his own articles covering the ongoing civil war in Yemen. Although the public has had an appetite for soft news stories since time immemorial—particularly sensationalistic and salacious ones—social media algorithms amplify this thirst by surfacing content that elicits quick fits of engagement rather than deep deliberation. Ultimately, this leads to an information ecosystem that is oriented toward producing content that algorithms incentivize rather than the journalism that democracy requires.

While early Milton Wolf Seminars generally celebrated the erosion of the journalism industry's gatekeeping authority, more recent attendees emphasized the deleterious impact of the journalism crisis on liberal democracy. Victor Pickard highlighted research that demonstrated that the decline of local journalism has led to less politically informed publics, less civic engagement, and increased corruption. Dean Starkman argued that the collapse of local journalism—particularly throughout the American Rust Belt—was instrumental to the resurgence of rightwing populism in the United States, eventually culminating in the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Local news outlets have historically functioned as highly trusted gatekeepers even in federal elections, evaluating the policies and rhetoric of candidates seeking national office on behalf of the communities that they served. As trusted local news outlets laid off staff or closed altogether—in part because Facebook and Google sapped them of advertising revenue—Starkman argued that low quality information sourced from Facebook filled the void.

The Ambiguity of Platformed Politics

Participants at this year's seminar generally repudiated the giddy assertion that social media would swiftly fell authoritarian leaders and deepen democracy. Still, the waning belief in the capacity of social media to foment democratic change did not give way to similarly overwrought claims that social media were mere handmaidens of dictators and right-wing extremists. Instead, grand narratives about the influence of social media on democracy were placed aside in favor of fine-grained case studies of how particular social media platforms are used in concrete political contexts. What emerged from these presentations and discussions was a more textured understanding of the impact of social media platforms on politics as contingent and undetermined, as sites of active political contestation. As Monroe Price affirmed: "technology has always been an instrument of censorship as well as an instrument of liberation."

Multiple attendees attested to the practical utility of certain social media platforms to activists. Hossein Kermani discussed the role of Twitter in the #MahsaAmini movement that erupted in Iran to protest the killing of a 22-year-old woman by the government's morality police. In response to the protests, the Iranian government deployed their cyber-army to manipulate the flow of information on Twitter. "The cyber-army changed strategies based on the stage of protests and the event, and used diverse types of agents throughout," explained Kermani. Yet, Iranian Twitter users successfully identified the government's misleading hashtags and fake news stories, thus mitigating the efficacy of the government's computational propaganda efforts. In Kermani's analysis, social media platforms proved to be neither solely tools of liberation nor tyranny, but a plane of immanence whose political valence was constituted through political struggle.

One attendee noted that Telegram was helpful to activists in Eastern Europe because it enabled them to coordinate in real-time with each other as well as to inform the public about breaking developments. In contrast, they noted that social media platforms that use algorithms such as Facebook hindered their ability to organize. Since algorithms prioritize virality over newness, they lead to temporally scrambled feeds that delay the delivery of critical information to the public. This echoes findings by scholars such as Zeynep Tufekci (2015), who observed that during the outbreak of the Black Lives Matter movement in Ferguson, Missouri, posts about the protest did not surface on Facebook until more than a day later. In this way, the "algorithmic time" of social media platforms is inconsistent with the temporality of political mobilization and protest, which often require real-time communication either at a one-to-one or one-to-many level (Bucher 2020).

Renationalizing Internet Policy: Emerging Frameworks for Rebuilding the Public Sphere

Early Milton Wolf Seminars tended to approach social media platforms as global technologies that transcended national boundaries and defied traditional territorial based models of regulation. However, the global multistakeholder approaches to internet regulation that were in vogue a decade ago at Milton Wolf were altogether absent from this year's seminar. Instead, participants focused on the nation as the primary register of online governance. Critiquing the conceit that Silicon Valley companies are an exception to the general need for government regulation, Des Freedman argued that "the digital giants are private platforms, but they are not the only source of monopoly power. We need to consider the role of the state as an enforcer of rules." Rather than accept the premise that social media platforms are novel technologies necessitating entirely novel regulatory frameworks, panelists turned to the history of media

regulation to recover policy approaches that could be adapted to hold social media companies accountable to the public.

Barry Lynn called for reviving the anti-monopoly tradition in the United States to confront the entrenched market power of social media giants. Lynn argued that "before 1981, there never would have been a corporation as big and powerful as Facebook or Google." In this view, many of the ills associated with platforms—from user surveillance to the propagation of disinformation—stem from their overwhelming monopoly power. For instance, legal scholars have documented how Facebook's appetite for data and disregard for user privacy developed only after it defeated early rivals like Myspace and Friendster (Srinivasan 2019). After Facebook cornered the social media market in the late 2000s, the company quickly rolled back many of its privacy policies and redoubled its data collection efforts. By reinstituting competition in the markets for search and social, platforms would be forced to compete on the basis of privacy and consumer welfare.

An alternative regulatory approach conceives of digital platforms as information fiduciaries. As described by Jasmine McNealy at this year's seminar, the notion of fiduciary duties is derived from the legal obligation requiring certain professions to act as loyal caretakers of their customers' information. Just as psychologists, lawyers, and accountants are legally obliged to abide by duties of loyalty and care toward their clients, Facebook and Google could be required to protect the confidentiality of their users' data.

Still others called for renewing the common carrier tradition in the United States and Western Europe, which governments have historically used to prevent the owners of essential infrastructure from interfering with or discriminating against the content flowing through their channels. Because social media platforms are not classified as common carriers, Facebook and

Google are free to pick and choose which content reaches the public and which does not. Their algorithms are predicated on a logic of nearly infinite discrimination, providing hyper-personalized content recommendations to each user based on troves of their data. Reclaiming the common carrier tradition therefore strikes at the very heart of platforms' business model by insisting that they refrain from harnessing user data to create personalized content recommendations and targeted advertisements. For that reason, according to Amelia Arsenault, the central task facing reformers is: "can we put the platform genie out of the common carrier bottle?"

Finally, other panelists suggested creating non-commercial alternatives to the existing profit-orient media system. Victor Pickard proposed taxing platform monopolies in order to rebuild the news industry. Since Facebook and Google helped break the business model of journalism, he argued that they should be required to finance its reconstruction. Rather than simply rebuild the commercial news industry as it existed a decade ago, Pickard advocated for allocating money to fund a more democratic media ecosystem consisting of public media centers, journalist-owned news outlets, and community-owned publications. Meanwhile, Geert Lovink gestured toward the need for an entire "public stack" that encompasses not only publicly owned news outlets, but also platforms, software, and internet service providers.

Conclusion: Whose Post-Neoliberalism?

For much of the twenty first century, the Silicon Valley consensus represented the eschatology of late capitalism, lending neoliberalism an emancipatory frisson. It offered a compelling vision for resolving pressing social issues outside of the bitter, antagonistic sphere of politics. Where there was economic stagnation, Silicon Valley promised boundless innovation.

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Where there was political malaise, social media offered new avenues for civic participation. The Silicon Valley consensus ultimately did not solve the manifold crises plaguing democratic capitalism, it merely delayed the process of addressing them. As the ideological hegemony of Silicon Valley erodes, the structural problems wrought by neoliberalism now lay bare in front of us. As Geert Lovink concluded at this year's seminar: "platforms mark the end of the neoliberal era."

In this report, I have charted the passage from the Silicon Valley consensus to a post-neoliberal consensus at the Milton Wolf Seminar. However, outside of the Milton Wolf Seminar, much of the impetus for pushing beyond neoliberal policy frameworks stems from the tech industry itself. Over the last few years, Silicon Valley, Western militaries, and politicians from across the spectrum have come together to lobby for a robust tech-boosting state to compete with China. What some have dubbed the "Cold War 2.0" is being waged on multiple fronts, including artificial intelligence, semiconductors, 5G networks, and social media apps. To best their geopolitical adversaries, the new cold warriors enjoin Western governments to put aside their previous commitments to *laissez-faire* regulatory approaches and to take a more active role in the development of technology.

The post-neoliberal vision on offer from the cold warriors is therefore one of militarism and big business rather than democracy. In contrast, the Milton Wolf Seminar is an essential space for discussing approaches to media regulation that go beyond neoliberal orthodoxy as well as the *realpolitik* interests of powerful states. Going forward, it is imperative that the Milton Wolf Seminar continues to play host to heterodox voices who foreground democratic values in their analysis.

Note

[1] These comments were made in Amelia Arsenault's personal capacity and not as a representative of the US Department of State.

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