

# Why we should look to feminism to see beyond 'the new Cold War'

By Maggie Jack (DLI Visiting Fellow) and Seyram Avle (University of Massachusetts Amherst)

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There appear to be two dominant models of digital governance in contemporary geopolitics. One is represented by American techno-capitalism in which monopolized technology companies accumulate consumer/citizen data as their own proprietary resources. This model is extractive and follows the colonial template by mining data and advertising revenue in the Global South for wealth accumulation in Silicon Valley and other Global North sites. The other is exemplified by the current Chinese government, which enacts communitarianism, nationalization of platforms, and strict state information control and censorship. This model encapsulates what has been labeled capitalism with Chinese characteristics and effectively decouples capitalist expansion from liberal democratic ideals. Maintaining strict social control through the Communist Party, China's economic success in the last thirty years has provided a model of digital governance for other states in which democracy was already tenuous.

While these two models differ with regard to how far governments are allowed to intervene into private lives, widespread surveillance and value extraction act as tools of capitalist expansion and state control in both. The American media and public discourse may frame current tensions between the United States and China as a battle of value systems and governance styles, but we view the technological regimes that the two represent as two models of surveillance capitalism. 'The new Cold War,' as the continued conflict is sometimes described, is largely a quest for global market dominance. We find mainstream rhetoric limiting, as it continues a longstanding tradition of framing much of the world as marginal to the hegemony of one or two nation state super-powers, while eliding the increased role that 'big tech' plays within and around the borders of nation-states. Citizens often bear the brunt of government and corporate decision-making, so it is critical to understand how the geopolitics of technology are encountered in everyday lives.

In our paper, 'A Feminist Geopolitics of Technology', we draw on a long lineage of feminists to reframe current talks of Chinese and American digital dominance around the people in these so-called margins, focusing on the everyday ways they survive and thrive within what we call a geopolitics of technology. While the lineages and experiences of the black intersectional feminists,

feminist geographers and STS scholars we draw from differ, they share an understanding of the politics of the everyday (and of the personal) and help elucidate how technocapitalism and digital government models are experienced and resisted “on the ground.” They all also show an attention to care, grounded in lived experiences, and everyday resistance to capitalist-patriarchal systems.

From bell hooks (2000), we see sites deemed as 'marginal' as spaces of "radical possibility.. [and]...resistance" (pg 206), where counter-hegemonic discourses “not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives” (hooks 2000, 206) are produced. We also see spaces for the possibilities of what Erik Olson Wright (2010) might call “realist utopias.” Our collaborators leverage their supposed marginality in different ways, with some of them seeing the everyday joys of what they do as resistance, as black feminists scholars like Adrienne Maree Brown (2019) have discussed. An intersectional feminist lens requires us to see a global interlocking system of power in which digital technology companies are embedded in contemporary statecraft, just as it allows us to ground our analysis of geopolitics in place, and to recognize the everyday surviving and thriving that takes place through community. While states and 'big tech' entities may have power, they are not all consuming and a feminist lens shows us the alternatives and possibilities of being otherwise. We analyze these issues based on our long-term fieldwork in the tech and art community spaces of Phnom Penh and Kumasi.

Take the case of Rotha\*, an independent Cambodian arts curator who in early 2017 founded, Ptayah\* (meaning “house” in Khmer), an independent art space dedicated to giving students and recent graduates space to work on creative projects and meet new people. Ptayah has become a physical space and an in-person community, serving as a kind of (what Rotha calls) “invisible infrastructure” for a new art sector driven by young Cambodian people. Rotha demonstrates care in this project through an attention to the details of the space: it is comfortably furnished, with stylish aesthetics. She welcomes students and researchers by providing tea and street food to visitors and hosting events where like-minded people can talk about issues that matter to them.

Building this brick-and-mortar space to talk with trust has come to matter in Phnom Penh as the “geopolitics of technology” began to strain everyday people. In 2017, as this space was being established, the government of Cambodia, advised by Chinese media advisors, began to enact stricter information laws and shut down spaces for discursive dialogue in anticipation of the 2018 national election. These rules first impacted the traditional media sector such as radio and newspapers. By the end of the year, people were being arrested for oppositional speech on Facebook. These control mechanisms are not the only challenge Cambodian Internet users face.

Facebook has a monopoly over the consumer Internet, yet many Cambodians feel it is unsafe to post there, both because of this government intervention and because its UI is translated so poorly that it is impossible for Khmer-only speaking people to understand completely. As these digital spaces come to feel more unsafe, in-person, brick and mortar spaces that house communities of care like Rotha's became more essential.

In Kumasi, Ghana, young technologists design and build hardware while creating communities of care. Dext, a startup that designs and makes a STEM educational kit called 'The Science Set' started out of the co-founders' dorm rooms at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and technology. Recognizing a need for affordable ways to experiment and play with scientific concepts learned in school, they two co-founders, Antipem and Michael, would over the years tweak their design, court funders, reach out to local schools, and overall build a company that produces the sets locally in Kumasi despite the fact that they could be produced easily in China and shipped over. Staying local and hiring young people in a city that is not the capital is a choice to nurture the budding tech scene in Ghana's 'second city' and to decenter the capital as the locus of creativity and production. Adapting to Kumasi's ethos, for instance, of speaking the local language Twi instead of the official English, collaborating with craftspeople in the Suame magazine, cultivating joy and mutual support in the local incubator, Kumasi Hive were all natural extensions of this motivation. These in some ways mirrored their desire to make Ghana and Africa also legible as capable of producing useful technologies that didn't rely on the West or China, despite sustained neocolonial relationships with both.

### **Why does this matter?**

In Cambodia, there appears to be a move toward authoritarian politics using reformulated tactics of surveillance and information control, adapting in part the Chinese model of governance to a digital economy dominated by American technocapitalism. In Ghana, China's appearance on the donor and bilateral economic cooperation scene revolves around infrastructure and industrialization needs and whether China's interest can be parlayed toward projects that the West was never interested in. "On the ground," these shifts between two models of governance translate into everyday headaches and opportunities for those being governed.

A feminist reading of our fieldwork in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and Kumasi, Ghana, enables us to see the people and the communities embroiled in these changing geopolitics and the various everyday labors they take on to survive and thrive. It enables us to attend to the affective

experiences in the midst of everyday frustrations and make visible the community building efforts our participants undertake daily, for instance by fostering an environment for them to speak Khmer in Ptaya or Twi in Kumasi Hive. Staying in Phnom Penh and Kumasi and doing the kind of work that Rotha, Antipem, and Michael undertake daily is an affective connection to place as much as it is a pragmatic response to life. As middle-class individuals who have the choice to relocate elsewhere, deliberately carving out spaces for others who may not have that option is an act of care through cultivating space for collective survival. They recognize that their particular urban geographies symbolize unequal global power based on geography and histories of exploitation in contemporary capitalism. Yet they work hard to carve out alternatives to foster opportunity for themselves and others despite the constraints.

By asking ourselves how our collaborators locate, ground, and root themselves during periods of geopolitical change and challenge, we found various strategies for collectivity and care within the inequalities of the global world order. By consciously acknowledging the affects that accompany these labors, we are also able to perceive that while the work being done may be entangled in complex processes tied to the geopolitics of technology, the everyday practices are intimately concerned with collective surviving (Tsing 2015) *and* making space for others to thrive.

We hope these stories demonstrate the limits of the control of governments and technocapitalism, as much as they work to conscript us at all times. In writing these stories of alternatives, we hope to foster and support initiatives that emphasize personal agency and living the full human experience amid inequality and structural violence.



**Maggie Jack**  
Postdoctoral Scholar, Syracuse University School of Information  
DLI Visiting Fellow  
[mcj46@cornell.edu](mailto:mcj46@cornell.edu)  
[More Info >](#)



**Seyram Avle**  
Assistant Professor  
University of Massachusetts Amherst  
[savle@umass.edu](mailto:savle@umass.edu)  
[More Info >](#)