

# Grawemeyer Awards

## Digital technology aiding repression, says 2023 world order prize winner

by Denise Fitzpatrick

Digital technology is playing a growing role in advancing political repression across the globe, a trend that poses a threat to the world's democracies, says a scholar who today was named winner of the 2023 University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order.

Steven Feldstein, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, earned the prize for ideas set forth in his [book](#) "The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology is Reshaping Power, Politics and Resistance" published by Oxford University Press in 2021.

Feldstein examined how governments in China, Thailand, Ethiopia, and the Philippines have used a wide range of digital tools such as internet shutdowns, disinformation campaigns, artificial intelligence and even DNA collection to repress their citizens. For example, authorities in Hong Kong used facial recognition to identify protest leaders and censorship tools to keep protest information from circulating.

"My goal was to learn how digital technology will affect the way governments rule in the future," he said. "I found that as people come to rely more on online communication, their leaders are realizing they can use the same tools—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok—to spread propaganda, sow division and intimidate their critics."

His findings have disturbing implications for democracies and civil society organizations worldwide, said Rodger Payne, who directs the world order award.

"Through skillful, thorough research and analysis, Feldstein shows how democracies are backsliding and authoritarian governments are becoming revitalized by the use of digital technology," Payne said. "He also shares creative ideas for democracies, civil society organizations and businesses to mitigate that trend."

[Feldstein](#), who works in Carnegie's Democracy, Conflict and Government Program, was a U.S. Department of State deputy assistant secretary in the Obama administration. A former associate professor at Boise State University, he also was policy director at the U.S. Agency for International Development. He holds a law degree from University of California-Berkeley and a bachelor of arts degree from Princeton University.

Winners of the Grawemeyer Awards are named each December pending formal approval by trustees. The annual, \$100,000 prizes also honor seminal ideas in music, psychology, education and religion. Recipients will visit Louisville in the spring to accept their awards and give free talks on their winning ideas.