



# RESEARCH2REALITY

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## Who Can Protect Democracy in Digital Spaces?

An interview with researchers at the **Citizen Lab** at the University of Toronto

**Ron Deibert**, Founder and Director, Citizen Lab

**Christopher Parsons**, Research Associate

**Irene Poetranto**, Senior Researcher

**Lotus Ruan**, Researcher

### Ron Deibert

Early on, when I started Citizen Lab, I described the aim to become a kind of counterintelligence for civil society. Now, 15 years later, the old adage comes to mind: careful what you wish for. Because I think we're at that point now where we're performing that role.

### Christopher Parsons

The way that politics is being done around technology is absolutely inadequate. And the companies are not helping. As everything has moved to a digital environment, everything we do - we buy our groceries, we find our partners - everything is online. And that's where we form our communities now. That's where we talk now. That's where we're engaged in democratic activities.

### Irene Poetranto

From a government standpoint, I think we're lucky here in Canada. We have privacy laws. We have a democratically elected government. And even then we face challenges here in Canada, and certainly our neighbour, the US. Now there's also an expectation that social media companies are also the



there's also an expectation that social media companies are also the judge, and jury, and executioner, let's say, of what conduct should be permissible online. Is that ideal? Is that really the kind of society that we want to have? I think we need to have these debates.

### **What does your research focus on?**

#### **Lotus Ruan**

At Citizen Lab, we mostly look at information control from the perspective of censorship. That means keyword filtering, website blocking, and image censorship on social media.

#### **Ron Deibert**

I would say the signature of the Citizen Lab is our mixture of methods. I'm a political scientist, but most of the people who work here come from different disciplines. There are some very powerful tools and methods from computer science and engineering science that allow you to effectively lift the lid on abuses of power that are going on in cyberspace. Everything is connected digitally. All of these devices are communicating, and they're giving off evidence, if you know where to look, if you know how to find it, and you know how to gather it. So you can uncover some pretty powerful things, which we've done over now a decade and a half.