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Introduction

Governing the Digital Society

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DOI

[10.1515/9789048562725-004](https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048562725-004)

[10.2307/jj.28874939.6](https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.28874939.6)

[10.5117/9789048562718-101](https://doi.org/10.5117/9789048562718-101)

Publication date

2025

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Governing the Digital Society

License

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Dijck, J., van Es, K., Helmond, A., & van der Vlist, F. (2025). Introduction: Governing the Digital Society. In J. van Dijck, K. van Es, A. Helmond, & F. van der Vlist (Eds.), *Governing the Digital Society: Platforms, Artificial Intelligence, and Public Values* (pp. 13–24). (Digital Studies; Vol. 5). Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048562725-004>, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.28874939.6>, <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789048562718-101>

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Introduction: Governing the Digital Society

José van Dijck, Karin van Es, Anne Helmond, and Fernando van der Vlist

The acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk, completed in 2022, led to its rebranding as “X” and was followed by a rapid decline in the platform’s popularity, particularly among academics and journalists. In late 2022, OpenAI launched ChatGPT, which quickly amassed 100 million users within a few months. The weaponization of AI in global misinformation campaigns has become increasingly prevalent. Meanwhile, Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies are allegedly disrupting the global financial system and challenging international equity standards. Mark Zuckerberg’s ambitious project of creating the “Metaverse” has been developed at a staggering cost of US\$36 billion. Global platforms are significantly influencing the organization of labor markets in countries worldwide. Additionally, algorithms are increasingly involved in decision-making processes related to welfare eligibility, and AI-trained chatbots are being introduced into public schools.

As the above examples illustrate, in recent years, a growing number of digital technologies has permeated our daily routines, transforming everything from state and institutional functions to labor processes, economic dynamics, and social interactions (Schäfer and Van Es 2017). These technological innovations are seamlessly woven into the social fabric of communities and societies at an almost unfathomable pace. They have led to accelerated fears around misinformation and disinformation and have also mounted concerns about online polarization, discrimination, and inequalities. These combined issues prompt a critical and urgent question: Can digital societies still be effectively governed?

In 1996, John Perry Barlow’s “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” envisioned the internet as a realm of “all society” and “no government.” His utopic and idealistic view of Cyberspace, widely criticized,

Van Dijck, José, Karin van Es, Anne Helmond, and Fernando van der Vlist, eds. *Governing the Digital Society: Platforms, Artificial Intelligence, and Public Values*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2025

DOI 10.5117/9789048562718_INTRO

was based on two assumptions: first, that technology is merely “injected into” society, and, second, that governments are the sole actors in the process of “governing” the digital society. Both assumptions are flawed and have proven ungrounded. Digital technologies and societies are mutually dependent; they shape and define each other and cannot be considered separately. Technologies shape societies as profoundly as societies shape the development of technologies. Furthermore, governments are not the exclusive steering actors in the process of governing digital societies. The infrastructural foundations of digital societies are increasingly owned and operated by private Big Tech companies (Van Dijck et al. 2018). Most governments, China being an exception, have lost their ability to uniquely direct technological developments. In their everyday operations and in governing their populations and states, they increasingly rely on platforms, data, algorithms, chips, and servers, with both hardware and software supplied by a select few major tech corporations (Van der Vlist et al. 2024).

Digital constructs like the Metaverse, X, generative AI, and cryptocurrency are not accidental technological inventions launched by corporations to “disrupt” societies and drive social change. Nor are they inevitable forces of nature, leaving governments struggling to uphold legal standards and mitigate harmful effects. Instead, digital technologies and societies are deeply intertwined, with actors from the state, market, and civil society increasingly entangled in their endeavors to create and maintain the so-called socio-technical fabric of our (digital) society. This fabric is constituted by norms, values, agreements, and laws—a social contract to live together. In most Western societies, the phrase “governing the digital society” refers to the joint capacity of governments, communities, institutions, companies, and civilians to organize society, including its technological foundations. The Metaverse, for example, is not a “new” space where citizens can live beyond state boundaries; rather, it is society itself that enables platforms like Meta to recruit customers and monetize their activities. Digital technologies are not an “escape” from society, but are an integral part of our communal environment, governed by the same constitution and conditions for living together. Therefore, the central question of this edited volume is not just “Can digital societies be governed?” but also “How should they be governed?”

The concept of “governance” prompts two types of inquiries: How are societies governed by digital technologies? and How should these technologies be governed, based on public values? (cf. Gillespie 2018). The first question acknowledges that digital technologies can be powerful governing edifices. For instance, while social media platforms can facilitate the spread and promotion of hate speech and extreme content, they can also, through

specific technological and organizational features, effectively curtail toxic content and foster constructive public debate. The second aspect pertains to how digital technologies can be governed through laws, governmental strategies, or (institutional, local, or national) policies. Lawmaking and policy design are not exclusive responsibilities of courts or states; they emerge from meaningful interactions among state, market, and civil society actors. In Western democracies, laws are underpinned by norms and values that are publicly weighed and discussed before they are enacted.

For this volume we invited contributions from various disciplines to address the normative yet open question: “How can we develop and apply principles of (good) governance in digital societies that are organized democracies?” These principles often involve balancing between conflicting (public) values, such as privacy versus security, accuracy versus democratic control, and fairness versus efficiency. Public values cannot simply be bought “off the shelf” and integrated into technologies; instead, good governance requires negotiations between stakeholders and careful reflection about how “smart” technologies affect digital and physical environments. Many of these negotiations occur within specific sectors or institutions, including schools, city councils, neighborhood communities, hospitals, news organizations, and government bodies. We explore these value negotiations within and across societal sectors, aiming to uncover general rules for fair governance at institutional, local, national, and transnational (e.g., EU) levels. A key focus of our research is to strengthen independent public institutions in the digital era by making them more transparent, accountable, and resilient.

As the digital society introduces increasing complexities to the world, understanding and “governing” these complexities necessitate a multitude of perspectives and diverse intellectual contributions. Recognizing this, Utrecht University in the Netherlands encourages its researchers to extend their academic expertise beyond their disciplinary boundaries and outside of academic walls. The university invites them to join academically diverse teams dedicated to addressing grand societal challenges. Over the past four years, some forty to fifty researchers at Utrecht University—including graduate students, postdocs, teaching staff, and professors—have collaborated within the focus area *Governing the Digital Society* (GDS).¹ This research program has brought together experts in law, information science, public management, media and communication studies, philosophy, educational science, and other fields, demonstrating the value

1 For information on Utrecht University’s focus area *Governing the Digital Society* (GDS), see <https://www.uu.nl/en/research/governing-the-digital-society>.

of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary collaboration. The authors of the chapters in this volume situate themselves at the critical edges of their disciplines, contributing perspectives from law, critical data studies, urban studies, science and technology studies, computational linguistics, and the political economy of the media. As a result of its interdisciplinary nature, the contributions to this edited volume offer a range of approaches to governance.

This edited volume represents a selection of the issues that our researchers address. Despite our varying perspectives, methodologies, and writing and publishing styles, we share a profound concern for tackling issues that are important to us. Significantly, the digital society challenges us to consider not only technological innovations but also fundamental questions about human dignity, social equality, responsibility, and community care. Moreover, governing the digital society is not solely an academic concern but also requires collaboration with various professionals. Our scholars regularly engage with policymakers and public authorities, professional practitioners (such as police officers and teachers), intergovernmental actors, and citizens to address these major societal challenges (see also Schäfer et al. 2024). Governance is more than just a noun or a concept; governing is also a verb that represents an active process of engagement.

Organization of the volume

This volume is divided into three sections, which are all focused on the theme of “governing the digital society.” Each section highlights different aspects of governance and of the digital. First, we reflect on different aspects of governance across all three sections, highlighting both the governance *by* and *of* technologies. Second, we focus on different aspects of the digital realm: while the proliferation of online platforms has expanded opportunities for social exchange and communication, the recent surge of artificial intelligence (AI) in online environments has introduced new challenges for governance. Therefore, we focus on governing online platforms in section 1 and on governing AI in section 2. All sections, particularly section 3, emphasize the role of public values in decision-making processes involving both humans and machines. As mentioned, governance is not merely a technical or a legal process; it is a societal process through which norms, values, and morality are embedded in the institutions and daily practices of our society. While automated online platforms, AI, and the public values underpinning them are closely interconnected, we have structured our

sections around these distinctions to better clarify the multiple, interwoven ways of understanding digital governance.

The notion of *digital governance* pertains to the critical importance of “regulating control, coordination, incentives, and trust in ways that enable new forms of organizing, value creation, and value capture” (Hanisch et al. 2023, 10). Digital exchanges, such as platform-based transactions and online communities, often occur through large online networks facilitating numerous simultaneous interactions. The architecture and economic conditions of these networks steer users in their performative acts. While human users are governed by online platforms, state actors attempt to *govern* these platforms in return: often they do this by pushing analog governance mechanisms such as contracts, laws, and relational norms to their limits to make them fit for the digital age. And yet, when new technologies are framed by new laws (think, for instance, of the new European Artificial Intelligence Act [AI Act]), there is room for value creation and capture. Digital governance allows to negotiate public values and subsequently embed these values into online mechanisms for organizing trust.

In other words, “good governance” is the ability to govern the digital society in good trust, aligning these new frameworks with accepted standards and mechanisms for democracy. However, these standards are not universally accepted or agreed upon; digital societies are always defined by geospatial and sociopolitical boundaries setting the benchmarks for governance, particularly good governance. Consequently, it is important to involve various disciplines in reflecting on the opportunities and challenges of governance, as it spans across multiple aspects and dimensions of control, coordination, incentives and trust. Working on the issue of governing digital societies thus requires a diverse range of perspectives and approaches.

This volume is clearly set within a European context, focusing largely on European implementations of platform governance within EU legal frameworks. Nevertheless, the tensions between the global scope embedded in the technological architectures of these platforms and AI structures, and the (national and regional) context of their users, will resonate throughout most chapters.

On a practical note, the chapters in this volume alternate between scholarly analysis and academic reflection, and they shift between argumentative and conversational discourse. Each of the three sections includes three or four research chapters and concludes with an interview featuring an expert in the relevant thematic field. These expert interviews shed light on the ongoing efforts to address the challenges of governing the digital society. Both the interviewers and the experts are part of the GDS program.

Section 1: Governing Platforms

In the first section, four contributions explore how online platforms are governed from various disciplinary perspectives starting with one from media studies and public management to study the organization of social media platforms. Mathilde Sanders and José van Dijck argue how decentralized online social networks (DOSNs), such as Mastodon or BlueSky, seem to be the refuge for those who want to quit “mainstream” social media such as Facebook and X. These two types of platforms are often categorically pitted against each other. In this chapter, Sanders and Van Dijck argue that the choice for decentralization is neither categorical nor binary but should be the outcome of nuanced considerations based on public values. “Decentralization” concerns both the technical aspects (open-source software, software protocols, and data servers), and organizational aspects (content moderation, ownership, and business model) of a platform. To cement public values in a platform design, a combination of both centralized and decentralized technological and organizational elements may be preferable over a static category. “Good governance” hence requires a heuristic for deliberation to help developers and users navigate the inevitable trade-offs between sometimes conflicting values.

The second contribution explores “good governance” from a labor perspective. Gabriël van Rosmalen examines the European Union’s attempt to improve the precarious position of platform workers. He focuses on the directive aimed at reducing the power imbalance between workers and platforms by reclassifying the employment status of platform workers. This chapter investigates the effectiveness of this approach. While the EU’s attempt is a step into the right direction, it remains uncertain whether workers will truly benefit. Therefore, this chapter presents platform cooperatives as an alternative model for governing digital labor platforms. Characterized by democratic structures and worker ownership, cooperatives have the potential to effectively tackle specific labor issues. Platform cooperatives and their governance structures warrant more attention from legislators, as the policies of EU member states and local governments can play a significant role in fostering their growth.

The next two chapters highlight the issue of content and user moderation, which is often a complex interplay between human and machine intervention. Computational linguist Cedric Waterschoot, in his chapter, examines how the governance of online user comments on news sites has primarily focused on identifying and banning unwanted comments. His study highlights a more recent development: the promotion of constructive comments. Waterschoot analyzes how banning toxicity and promoting

constructive comments is performed internationally across five news outlets: the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Die Zeit*, *El Pais*, and *NU.nl*. The discussion explains the role of news platforms as institutional safeguards by fostering constructive comment sections through a combination of human intervention and AI-assisted moderation.

In the fourth entry of this section, legal scholar Jacob van de Kerkhof explores the use of “trusted flaggers” as an established practice in content moderation by internet intermediaries. This practice leverages the expertise of governmental and non-governmental organizations in flagging content. However, the compatibility of this practice with recent European legal frameworks that regulate platforms, such as the Digital Services Act (DSA), which has formalized this practice in Article 22, raises questions. This chapter discusses the constitutional tensions that emerge between the DSA’s new framework for trusted flaggers and pre-existing legislation, focusing on two critical areas: first, the right to freedom of expression as laid down in Article 7 of the Dutch constitution and, second, Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The author concludes by offering several suggestions aimed at enhancing the lawfulness, legitimacy, and accountability of the DSA framework.

The final piece in this section features an interview focusing on the governance of advertising on social media platforms. Taylor Annabell converses with legal expert Catalina Goanta about the regulation of social media influencers within the European Union. The integration of advertising into influencers’ “self-brands” and the cultivation of relationships with audiences has raised serious legal and governance concerns.

Section 2: Governing Artificial Intelligence

The second section of this volume focuses on the governance of artificial intelligence (AI), with all three chapters addressing AI regulation in the European Union, covering high-risk sectors such as the military to the broader implications of generative AI and its risk-based regulatory approach.

In her chapter, Machiko Kanetake engages with the EU’s legal discourse surrounding the regulation of digital surveillance technologies or so-called “spyware.” The chapter does so by focusing on the EU’s attempt to regulate the international sale of digital surveillance technologies. Within the EU, a particular legal instrument—the dual-use export control—came under the spotlight as a tool to mitigate human rights risks associated with the sale and transfer of spyware. While the field of law has developed to mitigate military risks within the EU’s security and defense policies, Kanetake’s analysis underscores the fact that the field of law has not sufficiently addressed the

multifaceted human rights risks that the sale of surveillance technologies may bring to destinations.

The next two contributions explore the governance of “generative AI” (a type of AI that can generate images, videos, audio, text, and more) by highlighting complexities in the European Union’s AI Act (proposed, at the time of writing). Fabian Ferrari discusses how the permeation of society by generative AI systems like ChatGPT necessitates the design of future-proof governance mechanisms for democratic oversight. To establish and examine this oversight, it is crucial for generative AI systems to be open for regulatory scrutiny. Ferrari proposes three key dimensions for structuring research and policy agendas on the governance of generative AI systems: analytical observability, public inspectability, and technical modifiability. The chapter uses the EU’s AI Act as an empirical focus, employing these conditions as benchmarks to perceive generative AI systems as negotiable objects rather than inevitable forces imposed on society.

Lisanne Hummel’s contribution critically examines the long-term usefulness of regulating AI in the European Union through the lens of the EU AI Act. The (proposed) act aims to regulate AI with a risk-based approach, requiring AI applications in high-risk sectors to comply with mandatory requirements. Hummel questions whether the EU AI Act adequately considers the intricate entwinement of the power of (American) Big Tech companies with the rise of (generative) AI. The EU’s explicit sector-specific focus overlooks the early stages of the AI lifecycle, failing to address problems arising from the significant impact these Big Tech companies have on the conditions for developing (generative) AI.

The section concludes with an interview with Natali Helberger, professor of information law, conducted by Fabian Ferrari, on the “governability” of AI systems. They discuss the possibilities and challenges of making generative AI systems transparent and accountable enough for regulatory oversight, discussing the principles of accountability and transparency that should underpin regulatory frameworks for AI technologies.

Section 3: Governing Public Values

The final section of this edited volume focuses on the negotiation of norms and values in specific digital environments. As platforms and AI applications become increasingly integrated into various settings—city environments, algorithmic government systems, schools—they play a central role in decision-making processes, highlighting the importance of human agency. The chapters in this section illuminate the stakes and dynamics involved in these processes.

From a communication and media studies perspective, Jing Zeng and Karin van Es redefine the concept of moral agency to examine and challenge the moralization of conversational AI tools. Instead of narrowly defining moral agency as a machine's ability for autonomous moral decision-making, their broader conceptualization centers on the system's capacity to adhere to predefined ethics and values. Using ChatGPT and ErnieBot as illustrative case studies, Zeng and Van Es explore moral agency as both a technological and political construct. This approach reveals the contentious nature of defining what is moral and immoral, shaped by power contestation among various actors in broader society. The chapter concludes with a critical discussion of the challenges related to governing moral agency, particularly highlighting the tension between Big Tech firms' self-interest and their proclaimed societal benefits, whether genuine or cosmetic, alongside the backdrop of societal discord and polarization.

Next, the discussion transitions to the impact of datafication and AI on citizens in "smart cities." Michiel de Lange, Erna Ruijter, and Krisztina Varró combine urban studies and public administration literature to show the importance of inclusivity as a public value in co-creating people-centric urban neighborhoods. Inclusive smart cities face the challenge of ensuring that the datafication of urban life benefits the collective interests of all citizens, rather than favoring a select few or impeding their full participation in urban society. The chapter conceptualizes inclusion in the datafied smart city by showcasing vignettes that address inclusive datafied smart cities, highlighting the need for collective interests to guide the datafication of urban life.

In the following chapter, Gerwin van Schie, Laura Candidatu and Diletta Huyskes adopt a genealogical and critical data studies perspective to examine the "datafied welfare state." They trace how norms about race and gender are perpetuated in Dutch public institutions' welfare distribution processes, revealing how these norms became embedded as indicators in welfare fraud risk-scoring algorithms. Their contribution explains how contemporary welfare schemes perpetuate historically gendered and racialized notions of Dutch citizenship. Through the analysis of migrant motherhood and racialized citizenship, they demonstrate how algorithm-based government policies interpret structural social disadvantages as a higher risk for welfare fraud. By demonstrating the flaws of such schemes, they aim to prevent such discriminatory systems in future algorithmic governance.

Focusing on the Dutch primary education sector, Niels Kerssens and Karin van Es address the implications of AI-based personalized learning systems on the autonomy of educators from a platform studies perspective.

They present inventory strategies for safeguarding and strengthening the digital autonomy (control over data and pedagogy) of primary schools during their transition to digital education by stressing the importance of collective and cooperative actions at the sectoral level, involving schools, public organizations, and educational technology (edtech) market players. The authors provide examples of collective initiatives aimed at expanding the governance focus from data autonomy to pedagogical autonomy. By proposing pathways for collective action and the development of alternative ecosystems for digital education, Kerssens and Van Es aim to counterbalance the mounting influence of Big Tech companies within “platformized” national educational systems across Europe and globally.

The section concludes with an interview by Viktorija Morozovaitė with Professor Janneke Gerards, an expert in fundamental rights law, on the implementation of public values and moral agency in legal frameworks that assist governments in algorithmic decision-making processes. Gerards discusses her contributions to developing important instruments like the Fundamental Rights and Algorithms Impact Assessment (FRAIA), aiming to enhance the quality of public governance in the digital age.

Concluding the edited book, Professor of Public Management Albert Meijer offers his bird’s-eye view on matters of governance in the digital age. In his contribution, he aims to connect the dots between all the chapters and interviews in the volume, reflecting on the concept of “governing the digital society” in relation to the various theoretical, disciplinary, and professional perspectives that were brought together in this book.

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