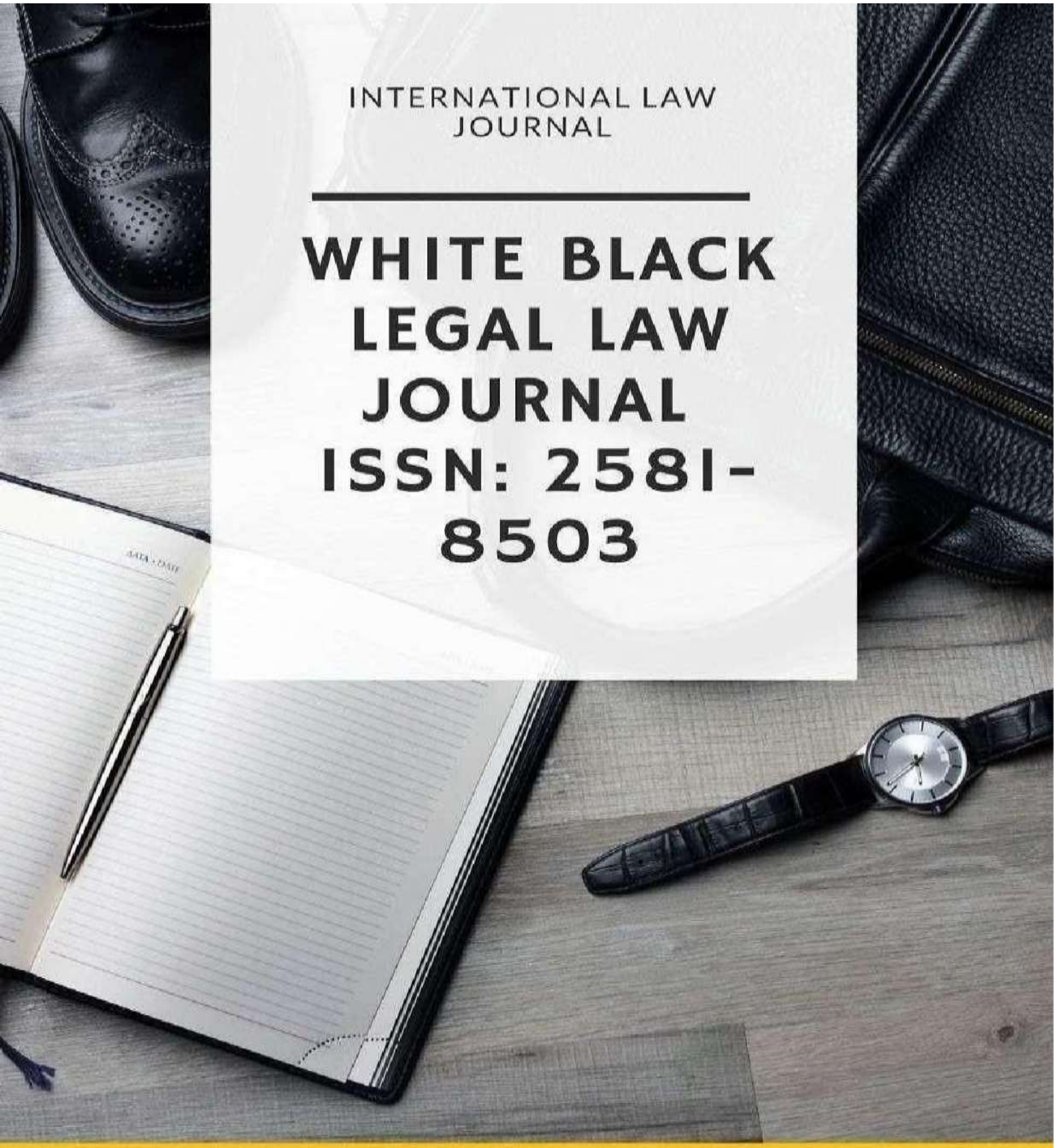

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PLATFORM POWER AND INFORMAL GOVERNANCE: RETHINKING AUTHORITY IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly embedded within digital platforms that mediate economic exchange, political communication, and social interaction. While existing debates on AI governance have largely focused on state regulation and formal legal frameworks, comparatively less attention has been paid to the role of platforms as de facto governance actors. This article examines how AI-enabled platforms exercise forms of authority that are neither fully public nor entirely private, but instead operate within an emerging space of informal governance. It argues that these platforms do not merely facilitate interaction; they structure visibility, prioritise information, and shape behavioural outcomes through algorithmic systems that function as regulatory mechanisms in practice.

Drawing on an interdisciplinary approach, the paper conceptualises platform power as a form of governance exercised through infrastructural control, data asymmetry, and algorithmic mediation. It further analyses how this form of authority challenges conventional distinctions between state and non-state actors, law and code, and regulation and design. The article concludes that existing governance frameworks remain insufficient to address these dynamics and calls for a re-conceptualisation of authority that accounts for the distributed and informal nature of AI-driven power in the contemporary global order.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence; Platform Governance; Informal Authority; Algorithmic Power; Global Governance; Digital Platforms

1. Introduction: From Tools to Governors

Artificial intelligence is often described in functional terms: as a tool that enhances efficiency, improves prediction, or augments decision-making. This framing, while not incorrect, is increasingly insufficient. In contemporary digital environments, AI does not operate in isolation. It is embedded within large-scale platforms that organise communication, structure markets, and mediate access to information. As a result, the question is no longer simply what AI can do, but where and how its capabilities are exercised.

Digital platforms have become central infrastructures of social, economic, and political life. Search engines determine informational visibility, social media platforms shape public discourse, and digital marketplaces organise economic exchange. These systems rely extensively on AI to manage scale, filter content, and personalise interaction. In doing so, they do more than facilitate activity; they structure the conditions under which activity occurs. The distinction between enabling and governing becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

This shift introduces a problem that existing frameworks are not well equipped to address. Traditional approaches to governance, particularly in law and international relations, are largely state-centric. Authority is assumed to reside in institutions with formal mandates, territorial jurisdiction, and identifiable mechanisms of accountability. Platforms do not fit neatly within this model. They are privately owned, globally distributed, and operationally opaque in ways that complicate conventional oversight. Yet their decisions—often implemented through algorithmic systems—have regulatory effects in practice.

This article examines the emergence of platform-mediated authority as a form of informal governance. It argues that AI-enabled platforms exercise power not through formal rulemaking, but through infrastructural control, data asymmetry, and algorithmic mediation. These forms of control shape behaviour, allocate visibility, and influence outcomes without necessarily appearing as governance in the traditional sense. The result is a dispersed and often indirect mode of authority that operates alongside, and at times beyond, formal institutional structures.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, it conceptualises platform power by examining the infrastructural and algorithmic dimensions through which authority is exercised. Second, it situates this power within the broader framework of informal governance, highlighting how platforms function as de facto regulators in specific domains. Third, it explores the implications of this shift for global governance, particularly in relation to accountability, legitimacy, and the distribution of power. The article concludes by outlining the need to rethink governance frameworks in ways that reflect the distributed and hybrid nature of authority in AI-mediated

environments.

2. Conceptualising Platform Power

2.1 Platforms as Infrastructural Actors

Digital platforms are frequently described as intermediaries that connect users, facilitate exchange, or enable communication. While this characterisation captures their functional role, it understates their structural significance. Platforms are not merely participants within digital environments; they constitute the environments themselves. In this sense, they operate as infrastructure.

Infrastructure, in its conventional understanding, refers to systems that organise and sustain activity at scale while remaining relatively unobtrusive in everyday use. Roads, electricity grids, and communication networks do not simply support interaction; they shape the conditions under which interaction is possible. Digital platforms increasingly perform a comparable function. They provide the underlying architecture through which information circulates, transactions occur, and social relations are maintained.

This infrastructural position grants platforms a distinct form of power. Control over infrastructure is not exercised through direct command, but through the capacity to organise access, prioritise flows, and structure participation. Decisions about interface design, access conditions, and system architecture determine who can engage, how they engage, and what forms of activity are enabled or constrained. These decisions are rarely framed as political or regulatory, yet their effects are systemic.

Importantly, infrastructural power operates through dependency. As users, institutions, and even governments become reliant on platform-based systems, alternatives become increasingly difficult to pursue. This dependency is not necessarily imposed; it emerges through network effects, efficiency gains, and the consolidation of digital ecosystems. However, once established, it limits the range of viable choices available to actors operating within these systems.

Understanding platforms as infrastructure therefore shifts the analytical focus from what platforms do to what they make possible. It highlights how authority can be exercised indirectly, through the organisation of systems rather than the issuance of rules. This provides a foundation for analysing platform power as a form of governance that is embedded in structure rather than explicitly articulated.

2.2 Algorithmic Mediation as Regulation

If infrastructure provides the architecture, algorithms provide the logic through which that architecture operates. Within digital platforms, algorithmic systems are responsible for sorting, ranking, filtering, and recommending content at a scale that cannot be managed through human intervention alone. These processes are often framed in technical terms, as solutions to problems of volume and complexity. However, their effects extend beyond efficiency.

Algorithmic mediation determines the visibility and accessibility of information. In environments characterised by informational abundance, what is not selected is effectively excluded. Ranking systems prioritise certain forms of content over others, shaping what users encounter and, by extension, how they interpret events, issues, and social realities. These processes do not dictate outcomes in a deterministic sense, but they influence the range and distribution of possibilities.

This introduces a regulatory dimension to algorithmic systems. Regulation, in its broadest sense, involves the structuring of behaviour through rules, incentives, or constraints. Algorithmic systems perform a similar function, albeit in a less explicit manner. By organising information flows and structuring user interaction, they create conditions that encourage certain behaviours while discouraging others. The regulation occurs not through formal prohibition or obligation, but through calibrated visibility and accessibility.

A key feature of this form of regulation is its opacity. Unlike formal legal rules, algorithmic processes are not fully visible to those subject to them. Users may be aware that content is being filtered or prioritised, but the criteria and mechanisms remain only partially accessible. This does not render the system arbitrary, but it does complicate the ability of external actors to scrutinise or contest its operation.

At the same time, algorithmic mediation is dynamic. Systems are continuously updated in response to data inputs, performance metrics, and evolving objectives. This fluidity distinguishes algorithmic regulation from more static forms of rulemaking. It allows for adaptability, but also introduces uncertainty regarding how decisions are made and how they may change over time.

Taken together, these characteristics suggest that algorithmic systems should not be understood solely as technical tools, but as mechanisms that structure interaction in ways analogous to regulation. They operate within platforms that function as infrastructure, and in doing so, contribute to a form of governance that is dispersed, indirect, and embedded within design rather than formally codified.

3. Informal Governance in the Age of AI

3.1 What is Informal Governance?

Governance is typically associated with formal institutions, codified rules, and identifiable authority structures. Within legal and political frameworks, it is tied to mandates, jurisdiction, and enforceable norms. However, not all forms of behavioural structuring operate through these channels. A significant portion of governance in contemporary systems occurs through arrangements that lack formal legal status but nonetheless shape outcomes in consistent and predictable ways. This is broadly captured under the notion of informal governance.

Informal governance does not imply the absence of structure. Rather, it refers to modes of coordination and control that operate without explicit legal codification or centralised authority. These may emerge through norms, practices, or institutional arrangements that are not formally recognised as regulatory, yet exert tangible influence over behaviour. In international relations, such forms of governance are visible in soft law instruments, standard-setting bodies, and network-based coordination mechanisms. Their authority derives less from enforceability and more from embeddedness within systems of practice.

In the context of AI-enabled platforms, informal governance takes on a distinct configuration. The structuring of behaviour does not occur through articulated norms alone, but through the design and operation of technical systems. Rules are not always declared; they are often embedded. The conditions that shape participation, visibility, and interaction are implemented through platform architectures and algorithmic processes rather than through publicly accessible regulatory frameworks.

This introduces a shift in how governance is experienced. Instead of encountering explicit rules that can be interpreted, contested, or negotiated, users operate within environments where constraints and incentives are pre-configured. The absence of formal articulation does not diminish the regulatory effect. If anything, it alters the terms under which that effect can be understood and challenged.

3.2 Platforms as De Facto Regulators

The characterisation of platforms as intermediaries becomes difficult to sustain when their operational role is examined more closely. In practice, platforms perform functions that resemble those traditionally associated with regulatory institutions. They establish conditions of access, determine permissible forms of content, and shape patterns of interaction. These functions are carried out continuously and at scale, often through automated systems.

One area where this is particularly visible is content moderation. Platforms define categories of acceptable and unacceptable content, implement detection mechanisms, and apply enforcement measures ranging from reduced visibility to removal. While these processes are sometimes guided by publicly stated policies, their implementation relies heavily on algorithmic systems and internal decision-making processes. The resulting framework governs speech and expression within platform environments, even though it operates outside conventional legal structures.

A similar dynamic is observable in data governance. Platforms determine how data is collected, processed, and utilised within their systems. These decisions influence not only individual user experience but also broader patterns of information flow and economic activity. The governance of data is thus embedded within platform operations, rather than being exclusively dictated by external regulatory regimes.

Beyond these domains, platforms also shape behaviour through more indirect mechanisms. Recommendation systems, interface design, and feedback loops create incentives that encourage certain forms of engagement while discouraging others. These mechanisms do not mandate behaviour, but they structure the environment in ways that make some actions more likely than others. Over time, such structuring can have cumulative effects on communication patterns, market dynamics, and even political engagement.

What distinguishes platforms from traditional regulators is not the absence of regulatory function, but the manner in which that function is exercised. Authority is not derived from formal delegation or legal mandate, but from control over systems that organise activity. This authority is often fragmented, distributed across different layers of platform operation, and not always visible to those subject to it.

Recognising platforms as de facto regulators therefore requires a shift in analytical perspective. It involves moving beyond formal categories of governance to examine how control is exercised in practice. In AI-mediated environments, governance is not confined to institutions that make rules; it is also embedded in systems that shape the conditions under which rules become relevant.

4. Mechanisms of Platform Authority

4.1 Control over Data and Information Flows

A central mechanism through which platforms exercise authority lies in their control over data and the organisation of information flows. This control is not limited to the possession of large

datasets; it extends to the capacity to determine how data is collected, processed, and circulated within platform environments. In practical terms, this allows platforms to shape both the inputs and outputs of digital interaction.

The significance of this control becomes evident in disputes over data access and platform dependency. For instance, regulatory scrutiny of companies such as Google and Meta in the European Union has repeatedly centred on the asymmetry between platforms that accumulate and process vast amounts of user data and external actors who rely on access to these systems for visibility or market participation. Investigations under the European Commission's competition framework have highlighted how control over data can reinforce market dominance by limiting the ability of competitors to replicate or challenge platform services.

Similarly, Apple's App Tracking Transparency (ATT) policy illustrates how control over data flows can restructure entire digital ecosystems. By restricting third-party tracking across applications, Apple effectively altered the data environment on which many advertising-based business models depended. While framed as a privacy-enhancing measure, the policy also consolidated Apple's position within its own ecosystem by privileging first-party data access. The episode demonstrates that decisions over data governance, even when justified on normative grounds, have distributive consequences that extend beyond individual users.

These examples underscore that data control is not merely a technical matter. It functions as a mechanism of authority by shaping who has access to information, under what conditions, and with what consequences. Actors operating within platform environments must adapt to these conditions, often without meaningful capacity to negotiate them. In this sense, control over data flows constitutes a form of structural power that operates prior to, and independently of, formal regulatory intervention.

4.2 Visibility and Ranking Power

If data control defines the underlying resource, visibility determines its practical effect. In environments characterised by information abundance, the question is not simply what content exists, but what content is made visible. Platforms mediate this process through ranking and recommendation systems that prioritise certain information over others.

The regulatory implications of this mechanism have been widely observed in the context of search and social media platforms. The European Commission's 2017 decision against Google in the Google Shopping case is instructive in this regard. The Commission found that Google had systematically favoured its own comparison shopping service in search results, thereby distorting competition by manipulating visibility rather than excluding competitors outright.

The case illustrates how ranking decisions, which may appear as technical optimisations, can have significant economic consequences by shaping user attention.

Beyond market competition, visibility also has implications for political communication and public discourse. Internal documents released during investigations into social media platforms have indicated that engagement-driven ranking systems can amplify certain types of content, particularly those that generate strong user reactions. While such outcomes are not always the result of deliberate intent, they highlight how algorithmic prioritisation can influence the tone and trajectory of public communication.

Importantly, visibility operates as a form of indirect regulation. Platforms do not need to prohibit content in order to marginalise it; reducing its visibility may be sufficient. Conversely, amplification can confer legitimacy or prominence without formal endorsement. These dynamics complicate traditional regulatory approaches, which tend to focus on binary distinctions such as permitted versus prohibited content. In platform environments, the more consequential question may be what is seen and what remains effectively invisible.

4.3 Behavioural Steering and Nudging

A further dimension of platform authority emerges through the capacity to shape user behaviour. This does not typically occur through explicit instruction or coercion, but through the design of interfaces, feedback mechanisms, and recommendation systems that influence how users interact with digital environments.

The concept of behavioural nudging, originally developed within behavioural economics, provides a useful framework for understanding this process. In platform contexts, nudges are embedded within system design. Features such as autoplay, personalised recommendations, and notification systems are structured to encourage continued engagement. While these features are often justified in terms of user convenience or experience, they also serve to guide patterns of behaviour in ways that align with platform objectives.

The regulatory relevance of such mechanisms has been recognised in emerging policy debates. For example, the European Union's Digital Services Act includes provisions addressing "dark patterns," referring to interface designs that manipulate user choices or obscure meaningful consent. The inclusion of such provisions reflects an acknowledgment that behavioural influence can operate through design choices that fall outside traditional categories of regulation.

Empirical controversies surrounding recommendation systems further illustrate this dynamic. Studies and policy discussions in the United States and Europe have examined how automated

recommendation systems on platforms such as YouTube can direct users toward increasingly specific or polarising content through iterative suggestions. While the extent and causality of such effects remain debated, the underlying concern is that behavioural trajectories can be shaped incrementally through system design rather than explicit direction.

Behavioural steering thus represents a subtler, but no less significant, mechanism of authority. It operates through the alignment of incentives, the structuring of choices, and the calibration of user experience. Unlike formal rules, these mechanisms do not present themselves as obligations or prohibitions. Instead, they shape the pathways through which decisions are made, often without requiring conscious recognition from users.

5. Blurring Boundaries: State, Market, and Platform

5.1 Erosion of State-Centric Governance

The emergence of platform-mediated authority complicates the assumption that governance is primarily exercised by states. While states retain formal regulatory authority, their capacity to shape outcomes within digital environments is increasingly mediated by private platforms that operate across jurisdictions and at a scale that is difficult to match.

This dynamic is visible in ongoing tensions between national regulatory efforts and platform autonomy. The European Union's attempts to regulate digital platforms through instruments such as the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act reflect an effort to reassert public authority over platform operations. These frameworks impose obligations relating to transparency, risk management, and competition. However, their effectiveness ultimately depends on the extent to which platforms comply, interpret, and operationalise these requirements within their own systems.

A similar pattern can be observed in the Indian context, particularly in disputes over content moderation and intermediary liability. The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, sought to increase state oversight over digital platforms, including requirements related to content takedown and traceability. Platforms have responded with a combination of compliance, contestation, and technical adjustment, illustrating that regulatory authority is not simply imposed but negotiated in practice.

These examples suggest that state authority in digital environments is increasingly indirect. Rather than directly governing behaviour, states attempt to shape the conditions under which platforms operate. Platforms, in turn, interpret and implement these conditions through their own technical and organisational frameworks. The result is a layered form of governance in

which authority is distributed rather than centralised.

This does not imply the disappearance of the state, but it does indicate a shift in how state power is exercised. Regulation becomes less about direct control and more about influencing the behaviour of intermediary actors who themselves exercise significant authority. In this context, the effectiveness of governance depends not only on formal rules but on the interaction between state objectives and platform practices.

5.2 Public–Private Hybrid Authority

The relationship between states and platforms is not limited to tension or competition; it also involves forms of cooperation that blur the distinction between public and private authority. Platforms are increasingly integrated into governance processes, whether through formal partnerships, regulatory compliance mechanisms, or informal coordination.

One area where this hybridisation is evident is content governance. Governments often rely on platforms to enforce rules related to harmful or illegal content, particularly in areas such as misinformation, extremism, and public safety. While legal frameworks may define categories of prohibited content, the identification and enforcement of these categories are frequently delegated, in practice, to platform systems and internal decision-making processes.

The European Union's Code of Practice on Disinformation, although voluntary, illustrates this model of governance. It relies on commitments made by platforms to address the spread of disinformation through measures such as content moderation, transparency reporting, and adjustments to recommendation systems. While not legally binding in the traditional sense, such arrangements create expectations and norms that shape platform behaviour.

At the same time, platforms maintain a degree of autonomy in how these commitments are implemented. Decisions regarding enforcement thresholds, algorithmic adjustments, and operational priorities remain largely internal. This creates a situation in which governance outcomes are co-produced by state and platform actors, but not fully controlled by either.

The hybrid nature of this arrangement raises questions about accountability and legitimacy. When regulatory outcomes emerge from the interaction between public objectives and private implementation, it becomes difficult to attribute responsibility clearly. Platforms may claim to be complying with regulatory expectations, while states may rely on platforms to achieve policy goals without directly exercising control.

This diffusion of authority is further complicated by the global scope of platform operations. A single platform may be subject to multiple, and sometimes conflicting, regulatory regimes across jurisdictions. The resulting governance landscape is not uniform, but fragmented and

context-dependent. Platforms navigate this landscape by adapting their systems to different regulatory environments, effectively acting as intermediaries not only between users, but between regulatory frameworks themselves.

In this sense, platform authority cannot be understood solely in opposition to state authority. It is entangled with it. Governance in AI-mediated environments increasingly takes the form of negotiated, layered, and hybrid arrangements in which distinctions between regulator and regulated, public and private, are less stable than conventional frameworks assume.

6. Implications for Global Governance

6.1 Accountability Gaps

The diffusion of authority across platforms complicates the attribution of responsibility. In conventional governance frameworks, accountability is tied to identifiable decision-makers operating within defined institutional structures. Platform-mediated systems disrupt this clarity. Decisions are often produced through layered interactions between algorithmic processes, organisational policies, and user-generated inputs.

This becomes evident in disputes over content moderation and algorithmic outcomes. When harmful content circulates widely or when certain forms of speech are suppressed, responsibility is not easily assigned. Platforms may point to automated systems, system design choices, or compliance with regulatory expectations. Regulators, in turn, may rely on platforms to implement and enforce policy objectives without directly overseeing operational decisions.

The challenge is not simply that responsibility is unclear, but that it is distributed in ways that do not align with existing accountability mechanisms. Legal frameworks are generally structured to assign liability to identifiable actors based on causation and control. Platform environments, by contrast, involve forms of control that are indirect, probabilistic, and embedded within system design. As a result, traditional models of liability and oversight struggle to capture how decisions are actually produced.

Regulatory responses have begun to address this gap, often through requirements related to transparency reporting, risk assessment, and auditability. The European Union's Digital Services Act, for example, introduces obligations for very large online platforms to assess systemic risks and implement mitigation measures. However, such approaches rely on platforms to interpret and operationalise these requirements, raising questions about the extent to which accountability can be effectively externalised.

6.2 Legitimacy and Authority

A further implication concerns the basis on which platform authority is accepted or contested. Unlike states, platforms do not derive legitimacy from democratic processes, constitutional frameworks, or formal delegation. Yet their decisions are routinely complied with, often without direct resistance.

This form of acceptance appears to rest on a combination of factors. First, platforms provide services that are widely perceived as necessary or difficult to substitute. Participation in digital environments increasingly depends on access to platform infrastructures, which creates a form of practical reliance. Second, platform decisions are often framed in technical or procedural terms, which can limit the extent to which they are perceived as political or contestable. Third, the scale and speed at which decisions are implemented reduce opportunities for deliberation or challenge.

At the same time, legitimacy is not entirely absent. Public controversies over content moderation decisions, account suspensions, and algorithmic bias indicate that platform authority is subject to scrutiny, even if mechanisms for contestation remain limited. Regulatory initiatives have sought to address this by introducing procedural safeguards, such as notice-and-appeal systems and transparency requirements. However, these measures operate within the broader context of platform-defined systems, which continue to shape how legitimacy is constructed and maintained.

The result is a form of authority that is neither fully legitimised nor entirely contested. It operates within a space where compliance is often pragmatic rather than normative, and where acceptance is shaped as much by dependency as by agreement.

6.3 Uneven Power Distribution

The implications of platform-mediated governance are not evenly distributed. Differences in economic capacity, regulatory influence, and technological infrastructure shape how states and societies engage with platform systems.

At the global level, a relatively small number of platforms—primarily based in the United States and, increasingly, China—play a central role in structuring digital environments. This concentration of infrastructural power creates asymmetries for other states, particularly those that lack comparable technological ecosystems. Such states may rely on external platforms for communication, commerce, and data processing, while having limited capacity to influence how these systems operate.

This dynamic is reflected in ongoing debates over digital sovereignty and data localisation.

Countries such as India have explored regulatory strategies aimed at increasing control over data flows and platform operations within their jurisdictions. However, these efforts are constrained by the global nature of platform infrastructures and the economic and technical resources required to develop alternatives at scale.

At the same time, platform governance can produce internal inequalities within societies. Differential access to digital infrastructure, variations in digital literacy, and the uneven distribution of data resources can shape how individuals and groups are affected by platform-mediated systems. These disparities are not always the result of deliberate exclusion, but they nonetheless influence the distribution of benefits and risks associated with AI-enabled platforms.

Taken together, these factors suggest that platform authority contributes to a layered and uneven governance landscape. Power is not only redistributed between states and platforms, but also across regions, institutions, and social groups. Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond a singular focus on regulation to consider the broader structural conditions under which governance is exercised.

7. Rethinking Governance Frameworks

The preceding analysis suggests that existing governance approaches are not fully equipped to address the forms of authority exercised by AI-enabled platforms. This is not simply a question of regulatory insufficiency, but of conceptual misalignment. Many current frameworks are built on assumptions that governance is exercised through formal rules, identifiable actors, and territorially bounded jurisdictions. Platform-mediated authority does not fit comfortably within these parameters.

One limitation lies in the emphasis on ex post regulation. Traditional legal frameworks often respond to identifiable harms after they occur, relying on mechanisms such as liability, enforcement, and adjudication. In platform environments, however, many of the most significant effects are produced through system design and ongoing algorithmic processes. These are not discrete events but continuous conditions, making them difficult to address through reactive models alone.

A second limitation concerns the separation between regulation and implementation. Regulatory frameworks typically assume a distinction between those who make rules and those who comply with them. In the context of platforms, this distinction becomes blurred. Platforms are not only subjects of regulation; they are also responsible for implementing and

operationalising regulatory objectives through their systems. This dual role complicates oversight, as compliance is mediated through internal technical and organisational processes that are not fully visible externally.

Emerging regulatory approaches have begun to engage with these challenges. The European Union's Digital Services Act, for instance, introduces obligations related to systemic risk assessment and mitigation, moving beyond a narrow focus on individual instances of harm. Similarly, competition law interventions, such as the Google Shopping case, have addressed the effects of platform design choices on market outcomes. However, these efforts remain partial and often sector-specific.

What is required is not a single, unified regulatory model, but a shift towards governance frameworks that are capable of engaging with distributed and embedded forms of authority. This may involve a combination of approaches, including ex ante oversight of system design, enhanced auditability of algorithmic processes, and mechanisms that allow for meaningful external scrutiny without assuming full transparency. Importantly, such frameworks must account for the hybrid nature of platform authority, recognising that governance outcomes are produced through the interaction between public regulation and private system design.

8. Policy Recommendations

The analysis presented in this article does not suggest that platform authority can or should be replaced by state control. Platforms perform functions that are integral to contemporary digital systems, and their operational capacities cannot be easily replicated through public institutions. The policy challenge, therefore, is not one of substitution, but of recalibration.

First, there is a need to move from a narrow focus on content-level regulation towards greater attention to system-level design. Regulatory efforts should prioritise the examination of how algorithmic systems structure visibility, interaction, and behavioural incentives. This requires mechanisms that allow regulators to assess system design choices without necessitating full disclosure of proprietary information. Structured audit frameworks, conducted by independent and technically competent bodies, offer one potential approach.

Second, accountability mechanisms must be adapted to reflect distributed decision-making processes. Rather than relying solely on fault-based models of liability, regulatory frameworks should incorporate forms of responsibility tied to system operation. This includes obligations related to risk assessment, documentation, and ongoing monitoring of systemic effects. The objective is not to eliminate opacity entirely, but to ensure that it does not preclude

accountability.

Third, greater attention should be given to the role of interoperability and data access in reducing dependency. Where platform power is reinforced by control over data and network effects, policies that facilitate data portability and interoperability can expand the range of viable alternatives available to users and smaller actors. Such measures should be carefully calibrated to avoid undermining legitimate privacy and security concerns.

Fourth, international coordination remains necessary, but it should be approached with caution. The diversity of regulatory approaches across jurisdictions reflects underlying differences in political, economic, and institutional contexts. Efforts to harmonise governance frameworks should therefore focus on establishing baseline principles—such as procedural fairness, auditability, and risk mitigation—rather than attempting to impose uniform regulatory models.

Finally, there is a need to recognise the limits of formal regulation. Platform governance operates within systems that evolve rapidly and are shaped by technical, economic, and social dynamics. Effective policy responses must therefore remain adaptable, combining formal legal instruments with ongoing engagement between regulators, platforms, and independent oversight bodies.

9. Conclusion

This article has examined the emergence of platform-mediated authority as a form of informal governance in AI-enabled environments. It has argued that digital platforms, through their infrastructural position and algorithmic systems, exercise forms of control that shape behaviour, structure visibility, and influence outcomes across multiple domains. These mechanisms do not operate through formal rulemaking, yet their effects are regulatory in practice.

By conceptualising platforms as infrastructural actors and algorithmic systems as mechanisms of mediation, the analysis has sought to move beyond a narrow understanding of AI as a discrete technological tool. Instead, it has situated AI within broader systems that organise social, economic, and political interaction. Within these systems, authority is exercised indirectly, through the structuring of conditions rather than the articulation of explicit rules.

The implications of this shift are not reducible to a simple displacement of state authority. Rather, they point to a reconfiguration in which governance is increasingly distributed across public and private actors, formal and informal mechanisms, and technical as well as institutional processes. This reconfiguration complicates established frameworks of

accountability and legitimacy, while also producing uneven effects across different regions and actors.

At the same time, the analysis does not suggest that platform authority is unbounded or incontestable. Regulatory interventions, public scrutiny, and evolving policy frameworks indicate that these systems remain subject to negotiation and adaptation. However, effective engagement with platform-mediated governance requires a shift in perspective. It necessitates recognising that authority is not only exercised through institutions that make rules, but also through systems that shape the environments within which rules operate.

Understanding this distinction is central to developing governance approaches that are responsive to the realities of AI-driven platforms. Rather than attempting to fit these systems within existing categories, the task is to refine those categories in ways that reflect the distributed and embedded nature of contemporary authority. In this sense, the challenge is not only regulatory, but conceptual.

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