Politics and Ethics in the Digital Age

Trinity Term 2025

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1   Course Descriptions

This course examines the politics and ethics of digital platform governance in contemporary society. We explore how social media platforms exercise power through content moderation systems, algorithmic curation, and policy enforcement while navigating complex regulatory landscapes. Through comparative analysis across platforms and jurisdictions, students will critically evaluate how different stakeholders—including corporations, governments, civil society, and users—shape the boundaries of online expression. The course addresses fundamental normative questions about legitimacy, accountability, and power in digital public spheres, considering both theoretical frameworks and practical governance challenges.

2   Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Analyze digital platforms as socio-technical systems with multiple dimensions: infrastructure, market, and political actors, and compare content moderation approaches across different platforms and evaluate their effectiveness, fairness, and scalability

- Critically assess regulatory frameworks from various jurisdictions and their impacts on platform governance

- Identify key stakeholders in platform governance and analyze their relative influence, interests, and accountability relationships

- Evaluate normative arguments about platform responsibility, free expression, and harm prevention in digital contexts, and apply interdisciplinary perspectives to understand platform governance challenges

3   Evaluation

Students should be present and actively participate in discussions. They are expected to prepare for class topics and be on time. Questions and comments are encouraged and expected. If students are unable to attend class, they are supposed to notify the instructor by email or in person of the planned absence before class to reschedule.

All work will be evaluated based on the ability to meet assignment objectives, clarity, professionalism, and quality. There will be **FOUR assignments (three essays and one in-class presentation)** throughout the course and no final exams at the end. Each essay or assignment should be emailed directly to the course instructor via email (diyi.liu@oii.ox.ac.uk) and will be returned with a mark.

The following breakdown explains how **the final grade** is to be decided:

- Short Essays*3 45%

- Presentation*1 15%

- Participation and Discussion 40%

4   Tentative Course Schedule

*The course syllabus and discussion questions are general plans for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary. Students can access all the reading materials **here**.

Session 1: What Defines Digital Platforms and the Roles They Play

Discussion Questions: How do different academic fields understand digital platforms, and what insights do each perspective offer? How have platforms evolved from intermediaries to active shapers of public discourse? What makes content governance on social media platforms distinct from editorial decisions in traditional media?

Essential Reading:

- Gillespie, T. (2018). Regulation of and by Platforms. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick, & T. Poell, The SAGE Handbook of Social Media (pp. 254–278). Sage. ***Please only read pages 12-22 about governance BY platforms.**

- Gorwa, R. (2019). What is platform governance? Information, Communication & Society, 22(6), 854–871.

Optional Reading:

- Culpepper, P. D., & Thelen, K. (2020). Are We All Amazon Primed? Consumers and the Politics of Platform Power. Comparative Political Studies, 53(2), 288–318.

- Nielsen, R. K., & Ganter, S. A. (2022). The Power of Platforms: Shaping Media and Society. Oxford University Press.

Session 2: Inside Content Moderation Systems

Discussion Questions: What are the advantages and limitations of human versus algorithmic content moderation? How do different types of platforms approach moderation differently, and why? What challenges arise when moderating content across different cultural and linguistic contexts?

Essential Reading:

- Caplan, R. (2018). Content or Context Moderation? Artisanal, Community-Reliant, and Industrial Approaches. Data & Society.

- Gorwa, R., Binns, R., & Katzenbach, C. (2020). Algorithmic content moderation: Technical and political challenges in the automation of platform governance. Big Data & Society, 7(1), 1–15.

Optional Reading:

- Binns, R., Veale, M., Van Kleek, M., & Shadbolt, N. (2017). Like Trainer, Like Bot? Inheritance of Bias in Algorithmic Content Moderation. In G. L. Ciampaglia, A. Mashhadi, & T. Yasseri (Eds.), Social Informatics (Vol. 10540, pp. 405–415). Springer.

- Gehl, R. W., & Zulli, D. (2022). The digital covenant: Non-centralized platform governance on the mastodon social network. Information, Communication & Society, 26(16), 3275–3291.

- Roberts, S. T. (2019). Behind the screen: Content moderation in the shadows of social media. Yale University Press.

- Stockinger, A., Schäfer, S., & Lecheler, S. (2023). Navigating the gray areas of content moderation: Professional moderators' perspectives on uncivil user comments and the role of (AI-based) technological tools. New Media & Society, 27(3), 1215–1234.

Assignment 1: In-Class Presentation

Due: May 14, 2025 Wednesday. The United States has historically favored a more laissez-faire approach to internet governance, combining Silicon Valley's open internet ethos with Washington's market-oriented emphasis on property rights. Recently, however, there are growing regulatory trends toward large technology companies.

Please prepare a presentation (around 15 minutes) that provides an overview of some key US legislations (Section 230, DMCA, FOSTA-SESTA, etc.) governing digital platforms. Your presentation should explain the historical context, identify which content areas or platform behaviors each legislation addresses, and discuss how these regulatory milestones have shaped platform governance approaches in the US (and beyond).

Session 3: Enhanced Platform Self-Governance

Discussion Questions: How effective are platforms' attempts to establish quasi-independent governance mechanisms? What specific legitimacy challenges do initiatives like the Meta Oversight Board address or fail to address? How do platforms balance maintaining control over their platforms with delegating meaningful authority to these governance bodies? What tensions exist between platforms' commercial interests and their governance responsibilities?

Essential Reading:

- Dvoskin, B. (2023). Expertise and Participation in the Facebook Oversight Board: From Reason to Will. Telecommunications Policy, 47(5), 102463.

- Medzini, R. (2022). Enhanced self-regulation: The case of Facebook's content governance. New Media & Society, 24(10), 2227–2251.

Optional Reading:

- Klonick, K. (2020). The Facebook Oversight Board: Creating an Independent Institution to Adjudicate Online Free Expression. The Yale Law Journal, 129(8), 2418–2499.

Session 4: Liability Laws and Speech Regulations

Discussion Questions: How do different liability regimes (Section 230, E-Commerce Directive, etc.) shape platform governance approaches? What are the strengths and limitations of different regulatory models: immunity, conditional liability, and duty of care? How do regulations balance competing interests like free expression, user protection, and innovation?

Essential Reading:

- Kulakov, F. (2025, May 2). Recapping Key Shifts in the US-EU Transatlantic Ties in Trump's First 100 Days. Tech Policy Press. https://techpolicy.press/recapping-key-shifts-in-the-useu-transatlantic-ties-in-trumps-first-100-days

- Turillazzi, A., Taddeo, M., Floridi, L., & Casolari, F. (2023). The Digital Services Act: An analysis of its ethical, legal, and social implications. Law, Innovation and Technology, 15(1), 83–106.

- Nash, V., & Felton, L. (2024). Treating the symptoms or the disease? Analysing the UK Online Safety Act's approach to digital regulation. Policy & Internet, 16(4), 818–832.

- Afina, Y., Buchser, M., Krasodomski, A., Rowe, J., Sun, N., & Wilkinson, R. (2024). Towards a global approach to digital platform regulation: Preserving openness amid the push for internet sovereignty (Digital Society Initiative). Chatham House. https://chathamhouse.soutron.net/Portal/Public/en-GB/RecordView/Index/203893 ***Just the basic typology of different regulatory approaches. No need to read the entire report!**

Optional Reading:

- Frosio, G. F. (2018). Why keep a dog and bark yourself? From intermediary liability to responsibility. International Journal of Law and Information Technology, 26(1), 1–33.

- Gorwa, R. (2021). Elections, institutions, and the regulatory politics of platform governance: The case of the German NetzDG. Telecommunications Policy, 45(6), 102145.

- Bossio, D., Flew, T., Meese, J., Leaver, T., & Barnet, B. (2022). Australia's News Media Bargaining Code and the global turn towards platform regulation. Policy & Internet, 14(1), 136–150.

Assignment 2: Essay 1

Due: May 21, 2025 Wednesday. In an essay of around 1500-2000 words, please select one Meta Oversight Board case (or a set of related cases) from their website for in-depth analysis. Your essay should provide a concise summary of the case(s) and the significance; identify the specific policy tensions and governance challenges it reveals.

The essay should examine the principles and reasoning the Board used to justify its decision and evaluate whether this case demonstrates that the Oversight Board represents a meaningful evolution in platform governance. Your essay should engage with course readings on enhanced self-governance and demonstrate critical thinking about the effectiveness of quasi-independent oversight mechanisms.

Session 5: The Role of the States in Platform Governance

Discussion Questions: How have state approaches to internet governance evolved from early cyber-libertarian visions to current regulatory models? What explains variations in how states approach platform regulation across different political contexts? Beyond formal legislation, what other mechanisms do states use to influence platform behavior (infrastructure control, informal pressure, market access)? How do states balance competing interests in platform regulation, and which stakeholders typically have the most influence?

Essential Reading:

- Barlow, J. P. (1996, February 8). A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace. Electronic Frontier Foundation. https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence.

- Gorwa, R. (2024). Chapter 4: Explaining Government Intervention in Content Moderation. In The Politics of Platform Regulation: How Governments Shape Online Content Moderation (pp.53-74). Oxford University Press.

Optional Reading:

- Balkin, J. M. (2014). Old-School/New-School Speech Regulation. Harvard Law Review, 127(8), 2296–2342.

- Cartwright, M. (2020). Internationalising state power through the internet: Google, Huawei and geopolitical struggle. Internet Policy Review, 9(3).

Session 6: The Global Effects of Internet Governance

Discussion Questions: How do we understand the distinct mechanisms behind the Brussels Effect, Silicon Valley Effect, and Beijing Effect in platform governance? What are the implications of these regulatory externalization effects for digital sovereignty, global internet governance, and user rights?

Essential Reading:

- Bradford, A. (2020). The Brussels Effect. In A. Bradford, The Brussels Effect (1st ed., pp. 25–66). Oxford University Press.

- Erie, M. S., & Streinz, T. (2021). The Beijing Effect: China's "Digital Silk Road" as transnational data governance. New York University Journal of International Law and Politics (JILP), 54(1), 1–92.

Optional Reading:

- Cohen, J. E. (2024, April 16). Who's Rulin' Who? Lawfare. https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/who-s-rulin-who

- Bueno, T. M., & Canaan, R. G. (2024). The Brussels Effect in Brazil: Analysing the impact of the EU digital services act on the discussion surrounding the fake news bill. Telecommunications Policy, 48(5), 102757.

Assignment 3: Essay 2

Due: May 30, 2025. Friday. In an essay of around 1500-2000 words, please identify and analyze one example of "regulatory externalization" in the Brussels Effect — where a policy or governance model in one jurisdiction has shaped platform governance practices globally. This could include the GDPR, DSA, or the AI Act. Your essay should describe the specific regulation/policy and its original context; analyze the mechanisms through which this policy influences platform behavior and regulatory approaches beyond its jurisdiction, and discuss the implications for global governance.

Session 7: Beyond State-Platform Relationships

Discussion Questions: How do civil society organizations influence platform governance decisions? What role do other actors (advertisers, app stores, moderators, third-party fact-checkers) play in shaping online speech boundaries? What makes multi-stakeholder governance initiatives effective or ineffective?

Essential Reading:

- Trithara, D. (2024). Agents of platform governance: Analyzing U.S. civil society's role in contesting online content moderation. Telecommunications Policy, 48(4).

- Palladino, N., Redeker, D., & Celeste, E. (2025). Civil society's role in constitutionalising global content governance. Internet Policy Review, 14(1).

- Helberger, N., Pierson, J., & Poell, T. (2018). Governing online platforms: From contested to cooperative responsibility. The Information Society, 34(1), 1–14.

Optional Reading:

- Dvoskin, B. (2022). Representation without Elections: Civil Society Participation as a Remedy for the Democratic Deficits of Online Speech Governance. Villanova Law Review, 67(3), 447–508.

- Grover, R. (2022). The geopolitics of digital rights activism: Evaluating civil society's role in the promises of multistakeholder internet governance. Telecommunications Policy, 46(10).

Session 8: Normative Debates in Global Platform Governance

Discussion Questions: What normative principles guide algorithmic content moderation and platform governance debates in academic and policy discussions? How do values like transparency, fairness, interoperability, auditability, and accountability manifest in different governance proposals? How might platform governance evolve to address emerging challenges like generative AI while upholding core normative principles?

Essential Reading:

- Automated moderation tool from Google rates People of Color and gays as "toxic." May 2020. AlgorithmWatch.

- Haggart, B., & Keller, C. I. (2021). Democratic legitimacy in global platform governance. Telecommunications Policy, 45(6).

- Ananny, M., & Crawford, K. (2018). Seeing without knowing: Limitations of the transparency ideal and its application to algorithmic accountability. New Media & Society, 20(3), 973–989.

- Mittelstadt, B. D., Allo, P., Taddeo, M., Wachter, S., & Floridi, L. (2016). The ethics of algorithms: Mapping the debate. Big Data & Society, 3(2).

Optional:

- Taylor, L. (2021). Public Actors Without Public Values: Legitimacy, Domination and the Regulation of the Technology Sector. Philosophy & Technology, 34(4), 897–922.

- Sambasivan, N., Arnesen, E., Hutchinson, B., Doshi, T., & Prabhakaran, V. (2021). Re-imagining Algorithmic Fairness in India and Beyond. FAccT '21: Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency, 315–328.

- The Facebook Papers. https://facebookpapers.com/

- The Gender Shades Project. http://gendershades.org/overview.html

Assignment 4: Essay 3

Due: June 13, 2025. Friday. In an essay of around 2000 words, evaluate a specific platform governance proposal or framework designed to enhance legitimacy in content moderation. This could be an existing initiative (e.g., national and regional regulations, Santa Clara Principles, Manila Principles on Intermediary Liability) or academic or policy proposals. Your essay should identify the core normative principles underlying the governance proposal, analyze how the proposal operationalizes these principles in concrete mechanisms, and assess whether the proposal could adequately address key legitimacy challenges we've discussed (e.g., democratic input, public participation, cultural context, procedural fairness, accountability).