

Robert Gorwa, **The Politics of Platform Regulation: How Governments Shape Online Content Moderation**, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2024, 250 pp., \$99.00 (hardcover).

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The Politics of Platform Regulation: How Governments Shape Online Content Moderation, by Robert Gorwa, a scholar who has extensively published in the field of platform governance, provides a comprehensive analysis of how politics shape today's online platform governance. Platform governance is a major force structuring the online environment, strongly influencing user behavior, and, consequently, shaping online discourse and culture. Accordingly, this book serves as a valuable resource for studying online environments and cultures, offering a solid foundation for understanding the interplay between platforms and politics. Gorwa's approach is grounded in a foundational premise of sociotechnical systems research, tracing a conceptual lineage back to Winner's (1980) *Do Artifacts Have Politics?*, which argued that politics is an indispensable factor in shaping technology and that understanding technological effects requires attention to their political context and objectives. This argument is echoed by Gorwa: "One must look closely at the policy actors involved in regulating technology companies and the political relations in the specific polity that is in question" (p. 72), underscoring the inseparability of technology and politics in the regulation of contemporary platforms. Building on this, Gorwa examines online platforms that are deeply embedded in everyday life and that most people now think of first when they hear the word "technology."



His book illustrates how current politics influence technological systems and how these dynamics should be studied in a scholarly manner. In a similar vein of Gillespie's (2018) *Custodians of the Internet*, which explored the encompassing infrastructure and context around the topic of platform governance, this book focuses more closely on "politics" itself, a major influence in shaping platform governance. To substantiate his argument, he structures his analysis around three main parts.

The first part introduces the concept of a platform, defining its scope while briefly addressing major issues such as copyright infringement, child abuse imagery, sexual content, disinformation, hate speech, incitement, and terrorism. In building the theoretical framework, Gorwa draws extensively on major scholars in sociotechnical research, including Gillespie, Van Dijck, Grimmelman, and Suzor, guiding readers toward key scholarly works for further in-depth study. Within this framework, he examines government intervention in platform governance, analyzing how, when, and why governments become involved. To address "how," he explores interactions between platform companies and governments, focusing on contestation, collaboration, and persuasion, and highlights how strategic settings and their associated payoffs are shaped. For "when," he identifies three primary factors—regulatory power, institutional constraints, and governmental capacity—

that drive cross-country differences. Finally, for “why,” Gorwa emphasizes the influence of political ideas and values, as well as the interests of actors and industries, in shaping intervention decisions.

The second part consists of case studies that trace the emergence and development of regulation and law in major countries shaping current online platform governance. Drawing on his theoretical framework, Gorwa examines each country’s key policies through a qualitative political lens. Importantly, by combining extensive documentation with interviews with stakeholders involved in platform policy, he constructs a qualitatively rich account. This empirical depth is one of the book’s key strengths, as it provides nuanced contextual explanations that significantly reinforce his overall argument.

In this section, Gorwa presents a chronological narrative that traces: (1) how major online platform regulations developed within specific national or incident-related contexts, (2) how these regulations shaped stakeholders’ perspectives on platform governance as well as being influenced by cultural and historical backgrounds, and (3) how these regulations affected technology companies and brought new challenges that necessitated further developments. He first introduces major incidents before addressing each country’s regulatory approach, thereby engaging readers to focus more closely on the contexts. Moreover, the narrative illustrates the distinctive approaches to online platform governance, highlighting how cultural and historical factors make jurisdictional differences more visible.

By detailing these incidents and their contexts, each case study enables readers to understand the broader landscape of platform governance and to appreciate the complexities inherent in its multijurisdictional character. This approach underscores Gorwa’s central argument that online platform regulation is shaped across multiple layers—legal, institutional, and political—and ultimately reflects the political qualities of each country simultaneously. However, the book pays relatively limited attention to a critical issue: labor in platform moderation, which is a central dimension of platform regulation and is considered particularly salient in the Global South, where it plays a crucial role in the implementation of moderation practices. Moreover, while the progression from issue identification to government regulation and platform governance is smooth and logically coherent, the translation of these regulatory frameworks into user-level experiences—an area of particular interest for sociotechnical and human-computer interaction researchers—remains underexplored. Consequently, future research, whether by Gorwa or other scholars, would benefit from integrating the labor dimension of moderation and incorporating end-user experiences, thereby providing a more comprehensive account of the platform governance ecosystem.

In the last section, by covering countries beyond the Western context—such as China, Brazil, and India—Gorwa reminds readers that platform governance is a complex and nuanced phenomenon deeply rooted in cultural and historical backgrounds that vary across jurisdictions. With the rise of many major platform companies, China has become an increasingly influential force in shaping platform governance, drawing on its political ideology and economic approach. Brazil and India also reveal unique political and historical contexts that strongly influence their regulatory approaches, often tied to the character of their regimes. These jurisdictional layers collectively constitute the current landscape of platform governance while also revealing the analytical limitations of the field in making sense of the transnational effects that arise from domestic regulations. In this regard, Gorwa’s incorporation of these rising powers in regulation into the

largely U.S.- and EU-centered discourse on platform governance is a strength of this work, giving it a distinctive quality.

A major theme emphasized throughout the book is that “politics” is not only tied to the interests of specific actors but is also deeply embedded in the societal context. By vividly capturing the interdisciplinary nature of online platform governance, the book offers in-depth insights into how platforms are guided and shaped by regulation, making it highly relevant for scholars concerned with online culture, sociotechnology, and online harms. The book also makes it a distinctive contribution for researchers in information technology and human–computer interaction, particularly those interested in how platforms’ features and affordances are shaped by regulatory frameworks, and how they might be reshaped in the future. For communication scholars, the book provides a useful conceptual map of regulatory debates, while its analysis of country-specific approaches to governance also serves as a valuable reference for policymakers, reminding them that online regulations are deeply cultural, historical, and political. Although the book clearly illustrates the complexity of platform companies’ approaches, it gives less attention to the intersections between countries—particularly how their efforts create synergies or conflicts in shaping platform governance. Further research could extend Gorwa’s framework beyond the regulation of content within individual countries, exploring more deeply important questions about the interplay between countries’ regulatory efforts.

References

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