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José van Dijck, Karin van Es, Anne Helmond, and Fernando van der Vlist (Eds.), **Governing the Digital Society: Platforms, Artificial Intelligence, and Public Values,** London, UK: Routledge, 2025, 264 pp., $189.99 (hardback).

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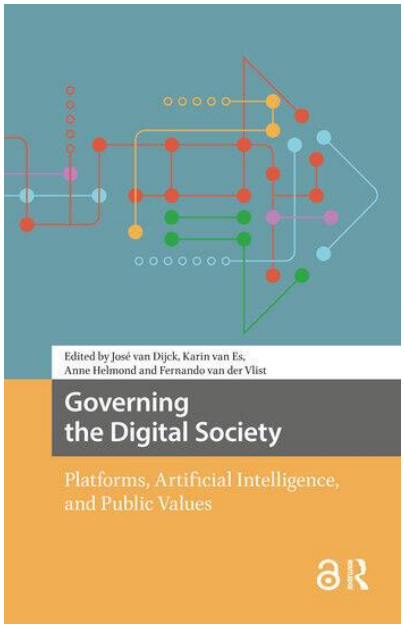

Digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) systems have ceased to function merely as communication channels or informational tools; they have mutated into foundational sociotechnical infrastructures that organize public spheres, civic institutions, and everyday social relations. As Big Tech platforms mediate everything from labor markets and municipal services to pedagogy and democratic discourse, traditional paradigms of communication policy and governance face an unprecedented crisis of efficacy. Historical models of media regulation, largely premised on state-centric top-down legislation or corporate market self-regulation, frequently fail when confronted with structural opacity, algorithmic autonomy, and political-economic consolidation of contemporary tech monopolies.

Against this contentious intellectual backdrop, ***Governing the Digital Society: Platforms, Artificial Intelligence, and Public Values***, edited by José van Dijck, Karin van Es, Anne Helmond, and Fernando van der Vlist, provides a timely and authoritative interdisciplinary intervention. Emerging from Utrecht University's "Governing the Digital Society" research initiative, this edited volume brings together scholars across media and communication studies, law, science and technology studies, public administration, and critical data studies. Situated at the intersection of critical platform studies and public governance research, the volume seeks to answer a defining question of our epoch: How can democratic societies effectively safeguard public values in an era dominated by market-driven, data-intensive digital infrastructures?

This essay argues that the volume's primary intellectual contribution lies in conceptualizing digital governance not as an exogenous regulatory force imposed on static technologies but as an ongoing sociotechnical process of negotiating, embedding, and institutionalizing public values across technical architectures and organizational practices. However, while the collection excels in delivering empirical granularity within European institutional settings, its interdisciplinary ambitions reveal persistent theoretical tensions between normative legal principles and market political economies, while leaving critical gaps regarding non-Western digital environments.

Rather than offering a chapter-by-chapter catalogue, the 14 substantive chapters and accompanying expert interviews in this volume are best mapped through three overarching thematic clusters that redefine the scope of digital communication governance.

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The first cluster examines how platform code, protocols, and governance structure communicative spaces and labor. Mathilde Sanders and José van Dijck open by dismantling the binary between centralized platforms (e.g., X) and decentralized networks (e.g., Mastodon). They propose a multi-tiered framework for evaluating decentralization across six layers, showing that scaling entails trade-offs between autonomy and moderation. Gabriël van Rosmalen evaluates platform cooperatives as a counter-hegemonic strategy to empower gig workers against algorithmic exploitation. Cedric Waterschoot analyzes digital journalism's comment moderation, uncovering a labor division in which AI filters toxic speech while human moderators manually curate constructive deliberation. Meanwhile, Jacob van de Kerkhof interrogates the constitutional risks of delegating speech policing to private "trusted flaggers" under the EU Digital Services Act (DSA), and Taylor Annabell's interview with Catalina Goanta highlights regulatory oversights in influencer marketing and monetization.

The second cluster shifts focus to legal frameworks and policy mechanisms designed to govern emerging AI technologies and surveillance ecosystems. Machiko Kanetake examines the European Union's export control regimes regarding dual-use digital surveillance items (such as commercial spyware), illustrating the acute friction between state economic interests, national security imperatives, and international human rights obligations. Addressing generative AI, Fabian Ferrari introduces a comprehensive five-layer framework of inspectable and modifiable properties to operationalize foundation model governance, emphasizing that regulating AI requires scrutinizing structural supply chains and compute power alongside output toxicity. Building on this technical critique, Lisanne Hummel evaluates the long-term utility of the EU AI Act, warning that static legal classifications risk rapid obsolescence due to the fast-paced evolution of foundation models. An interview by Fabian Ferrari with Natali Helberger further reinforces the urgent need to establish public-interest frameworks in generative AI governance.

The final cluster probes the sociopolitical implications of datafication within public institutions and civil society. Jing Zeng and Karin van Es examine conversational AI's moral agency, comparing how OpenAI's ChatGPT and Baidu's ErnieBot employ "patchwork governance" and prompt filtering to align LLM responses with corporate safety or state ideologies. In urban governance, Michiel de Lange, Erna Ruijer, and Krisztina Varró investigate people-centric smart cities, questioning whether civic co-creation projects truly foster democratic inclusion or merely legitimate municipal datafication. Gerwin van Schie, Laura Candidatu, and Diletta Huyskes critique the datafied welfare state, demonstrating how Dutch welfare fraud risk-scoring algorithms structurally reproduce gendered and racialized discrimination against marginalized mothers. Niels Kerssens and Karin van Es analyze how public educational coalitions (such as SIVON and SURF) mobilize collective bargaining to resist Big Tech monopolies in primary education, reclaiming pedagogical autonomy. Finally, Viktorija Morozovaite's interview with Janneke Gerards highlights practical applications of Fundamental Rights and Algorithms Impact Assessments (FRAIA) in operationalizing institutional accountability.

Taken together, *Governing the Digital Society* makes three substantial contributions to the field of communication and digital media studies.

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First, theoretically, the volume successfully advances communication scholarship beyond instrumental and technological-determinist views of governance. Rather than treating governance as merely synonymous with state legislation, the contributors demonstrate how software protocols, algorithmic architectures, and corporate business models themselves act as regulatory mechanisms that govern human behavior—what media scholars term "governance by infrastructure." By positioning public values (such as privacy, fairness, transparency, and autonomy) as contested sites of negotiation, the book bridges critical media political economy with public administration theory. This theoretical synthesis is formally articulated in Albert Meijer's concluding chapter, which synthesizes the volume into an eight-part assessment matrix evaluating how government, market, and civil society actors produce public values and democratic legitimacy.

Second, interdisciplinary synthesis constitutes a primary hallmark of this collection. Interdisciplinary claims in digital studies often remain superficial; however, this volume establishes a genuine dialogue across academic silos. Legal scholars evaluating statutory frameworks (e.g., the EU AI Act and DSA) work directly alongside STS researchers dissecting code affordances and media political economists mapping platform monopolies. This transdisciplinary approach prevents communication scholars from treating algorithms as unexplainable "black boxes," while simultaneously preventing legal theorists from treating software systems as static legal entities devoid of sociotechnical complexity.

Third, empirically, the volume is anchored in rich, qualitative and computational case studies that move beyond abstract normative discourse. From investigating Dutch risk-scoring welfare algorithms (e.g., SyRI) and analyzing school district negotiations with Google to conducting empirical jailbreak tests on commercial LLMs, the chapters ground high-level governance debates in concrete institutional practices. The inclusion of structured interviews with key legal and policy scholars (Goanta, Helberger, Gerards) further enhances the volume's policy relevance, creating a valuable bridge between academic critique and regulatory implementation.

Despite its clear strengths, *Governing the Digital Society* also reveals several theoretical tensions and thematic blind spots that point toward crucial avenues for future communication scholarship.

The most notable theoretical tension lies in the unresolved friction between public value idealism and platform capitalism. While several contributors advocate for embedding public values into platform design or fostering alternative models such as platform cooperatives (van Rosmalen) and decentralized networks (Sanders & van Dijck), the volume repeatedly illustrates that commercial platforms operate under an inexorable logic of capital accumulation, data extraction, and user retention. As Albert Meijer acknowledges in his synthesis, bringing heterogeneous disciplinary lenses into a unified theory of digital governance remains an ongoing challenge. Can normative public values be genuinely operationalized within sociotechnical systems whose primary architecture is designed for corporate value capture? The volume captures this dilemma accurately but stops short of articulating a comprehensive political-economic theory capable of overcoming Big Tech's structural market dominance.

A second limitation concerns the volume's Eurocentric empirical focus. Although the book analyzes globally distributed platforms and technologies—such as ChatGPT, ErnieBot, and international surveillance

software—its analytical and normative center of gravity remains heavily rooted in Western Europe, specifically the Netherlands and the regulatory orbit of the European Union. While the EU is indisputably a global pioneer in digital regulation (the "Brussels Effect"), focusing primarily on European legal frameworks and social-democratic state institutions risks underestimating the dynamics of digital governance in the Global South. In many non-Western contexts, platform capitalism intersects with fragile state institutions, authoritarian surveillance, economic precarity, and digital colonialism. Future communication research must expand these analytical frameworks to examine how platform governance and algorithmic control operate under radically different geopolitical and cultural regimes.

Finally, the volume highlights a persistent implementation and translation gap between normative legal mandates and technical enforcement. While tools like FRAIA and statutory acts (DSA, AI Act) represent major regulatory milestones, translating qualitative constitutional rights into computable algorithmic constraints remains highly complex. As AI foundation models become increasingly autonomous and adaptive, communication scholars must continue to interrogate how public value alignment can be rigorously audited without devolving into superficial corporate ethics-washing.

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