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Article

The Informal Future of Digital Governance

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As part of MediaWell's video essay series on transnational digital governance, researcher Robert Gorwa describes the issues and challenges that he believes will define the next five years. Watch or read a transcript of the video essay below.

Introduction

I'm Robert Gorwa, a researcher at the Berlin Social Science Center, and someone that has been working on transnational digital governance for the last decade or so, with a particular focus on the emerging public-private forms of rule-making in the digital economy. I've studied content moderation and "platform governance," the development of increasingly complex bureaucracies for "trust and safety" inside large social media and other user-generated content platforms, and how the functioning of those bureaucracies has been changing over time as it is increasingly contested by governments and other political stakeholders around the world. That last topic was the focus of my most recent book, *The Politics of Platform Regulation.*

What issues or challenges in transnational digital governance do you think will be most important over the next five years?

Well, this is an interesting question because I think when we hear the words 'transnational digital governance' the first thing that comes to mind is the idea of collaboration and coordination. And it might seem like that is something clearly on the out: since the Trump administration returned to power, the joint EU-US fora where digital policy was being coordinated (such as the EU-US Internet Forum) have been scrapped. If, for example, the FTC and the NTIA were taking more assertive, European-esque rulemaking approaches on things like anticompetitive behavior or open-source AI model safeguards, and it looked like these efforts might be internationally coordinated, that has evidently come to an end. It isn't just US-EU relations, of course: as many commentators have pointed out in the last year, the whole vibe of transnational digital policy seems to have become much more adversarial, confrontational, and zero-sum, becoming perhaps for the first time definitively and overtly linked to trade policy, industrial policy, and other "high politics" matters of the utmost political, strategic, and geo-economic importance.

That said, lots of new and interesting coordination is still happening transnationally, although it is flying under the radar of mainstream digital governance. In particular, I want to draw attention to the ongoing importance and also proliferation of what I have called 'informal digital governance' institutions. These are voluntary organizations, usually composed primarily of large technology firms, although often with civil society and sometimes government involvement. They serve as policy networks, sharing expertise and best practices for dealing with certain types of policy issues — they're often focused around a single topic or policy problem, such as child safety, or violent extremism — but increasingly are also developing technical infrastructures and standards that have major global implications.

Perhaps the best known of these organizations is the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, or GIFCT. Because they (without much transparency) operate really important governance infrastructures like the Shared Industry Hash Database of content that should basically not be permitted anywhere on the platformized internet, they have drawn criticism in some corners of academia and civil society. Evelyn Douek notably called these organizations 'content cartels' in 2020.

But some of the most interesting and salient organizations might be rather called more than just content cartels'. For example, the Tech Coalition's Lantern project is coordinating various platforms to work against child sexual abuse material, sharing not just lists of hashes but also other `signals' associated with removed accounts, including emails, IP addresses, urls, and other metadata, as well as statistical models and classifiers that firms are using to identify suspicious actors at scale. Metadata and signals approaches — something I wrote a bit about in a recent report for the Center for Democracy & Technology looking at how platforms moderate in the demanding technical context of livestreaming — are an extremely interesting and so far understudied development with global implications.

Another notable, very different effort, is the Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity, or C2PA, which has brought numerous platform firms, AI frontier developers, and software and hardware players together in an effort to develop secure metadata for online images and other media. They have created a toolkit which they are now trying to get standardized through the International Standardization Organization, and, if more widely adopted, could have some profound private governance impacts on the global scale as well.

Overall, what is going on with C2PA is I think emblematic of where the interesting action is at this moment: not necessarily in the most visible, executive-level international posturing, but rather in standardization organizations, informal institutions, and policy networks bringing together all sorts of digital governance actors.