CONCEPTUALIZING PRIVATE GOVERNANCE IN A NETWORKED SOCIETY

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Internet law and policy discussions worldwide are converging on the idea that the private sector has a shared responsibility to help safeguard free expression online. This article advances those discussions and makes a significant contribution to the related literature by synthesizing Internet governance concepts with those of content management and with normative theories regarding the social value of freedom of expression—all to the end of better understanding the implications of privately governing speech in a networked society. First, this article examines the emergence of the “networked public sphere” that has distributed the production of expression and renegotiated power relationships among individuals, state actors, and digital intermediaries. Second, to put

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in concrete terms the idea that intermediaries are regularly conducting “private speech regulation,” this article outlines the chain of digital intermediaries that make up the Internet’s basic infrastructure, shedding new light on the chain by employing a classification system developed originally to discuss different types of intermediaries and how they facilitate speech. This article uses the same classifications to discuss how the intermediaries can constrain speech. It also places these discussions in the context of affirmative First Amendment theory, which says the highest purpose of freedom of expression is to maximize individual participation in the public discourse. Finally, this article concludes by commenting on the history of corporate power over the public discourse and by calling on intermediaries to be transparent regarding their content-governance practices.

I. INTRODUCTION ..........................................................17
II. CONTENT GOVERNANCE AND THE “NETWORKED PUBLIC
SPHERE” .............................................................................20
   A. Agency, Dependence, and Contested Space in Networked
      Communication ............................................................24
       1. Conceptualizing Content Governance and Individual
          Agency .................................................................25
       2. Dependence ..........................................................29
   B. Interdependence ..........................................................38
III. THE CHAIN OF DIGITAL INTERMEDIARIES .................41
   A. Communication Conduits .................................................41
      1. Internet Service Providers ........................................42
      2. Upstream Providers ................................................43
      3. Domain Name System ............................................44
   B. Content Hosts ..............................................................47
      1. Web-hosting Services .............................................48
      2. Third-party Platforms ............................................49
   C. Search and Application Providers .................................54
      1. Search Engines ......................................................55
      2. Filtering Software ................................................57
I. INTRODUCTION

In July 2012, a man posted a short film on YouTube dramatizing the life of the Prophet Muhammad filled with “scenes based on slurs . . . repeated by Islamophobes.”\(^1\) The film, titled *Innocence of Muslims*, attracted little attention for months—until an Islamic television station in Egypt aired several scenes.\(^2\) What happened next remains a matter of national debate. On September 11, 2012, Islamic militants attacked the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya, injuring ten Americans and killing four others, including the United States ambassador to Libya.\(^3\) Many observers, among them the White House press secretary and the United States ambassador to the United Nations, initially said the attack was a demonstration against *Innocence of Muslims*.\(^4\)

It is now believed the attack was part of a larger terrorist plot unrelated to the film,\(^5\) but protests against the film flared in Egypt,


Yemen, Iran, and elsewhere. As the protests continued, Google, the parent company of YouTube, began acting as an arbiter of free speech, restricting access to the video in some places while leaving it unrestricted in others—performing a delicate balancing act normally performed by courts but increasingly familiar to Internet companies. Notably, Google blocked the availability of *Innocence of Muslims* in Egypt and Libya, citing “the very difficult situation” in both countries. The company’s general policy is to block content only if it violates local laws or a platform’s terms, or if the company receives a valid court order to block it. Google conceded that *Innocence of Muslims* did not violate local laws or YouTube’s terms, and neither Egypt nor Libya had ordered that the video be blocked—and yet Google blocked it.

In a few parts of the world, Google did block *Innocence of Muslims* where it violated local laws. Elsewhere, in the vast majority of sovereigns, Google did not restrict access to the video, even rejecting a request from the White House to reconsider its decision to keep the video online and accessible at all. When questioned about its decisions, Google released a statement that read:

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9 Id.
We work hard to create a community everyone can enjoy and which also enables people to express different opinions. This can be a challenge because what’s OK in one country can be offensive elsewhere. This video—which is widely available on the Web—is clearly within our guidelines and so will stay on YouTube.\footnote{YouTube to be Blocked in Egypt over Anti-Islam Film, CNET (Feb. 9, 2013), http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023_3-57568533-93/youtube-to-be-blocked-in-egypt-over-anti-islam-film/.
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To this day, Google has not offered a more detailed explanation of its decisions.\footnote{See, e.g., Jonathan Peters, \textit{Considering and Constraining the Power of Content Hosts, in Ethics for a Digital Age} 105 (Bastiaan Vanacker & Don Heider, eds., 2015) (discussing the “Innocence of Muslims” controversy in depth).}

Although the \textit{Innocence of Muslims} controversy might seem exceptional because of the worldwide drama surrounding it, it actually typifies the types of challenges that Internet companies are confronting as they police content on their platforms.\footnote{Id. at 109.} Google, Facebook, Twitter, and others, are regularly conducting “private . . . speech regulation”\footnote{Benesch and MacKinnon, \textit{supra} note 10.} as they “decide what types of content may be posted, whether to remove certain content in response to user requests, whether to remove content that allegedly violates the law, and how to display and prioritize various content types using algorithms.”\footnote{Peters, \textit{supra} note 13, at 105.
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Such actions—the content decisions that Internet companies make—deserve more scholarly attention. Right now, policy discussions worldwide, from the United States to the European Union, from South America to the United Nations, are converging on the idea that “the private sector has a shared responsibility to help safeguard free expression.”\footnote{Hillary Clinton, \textit{Remarks on Internet Freedom}, The Newseum, Washington, D.C. (Jan. 21, 2010), http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/01/135519.htm.}

This article advances those discussions and makes a significant contribution to the related literature by synthesizing Internet
governance concepts with those of content management and with normative theories regarding the social value and limits of freedom of expression—all to the end of better understanding the implications of privately governing speech in a networked society. First, this article examines the emergence of the “networked public sphere” \(^\text{18}\) that has distributed the production of expression and renegotiated power relationships among individuals, state actors, and digital intermediaries. Second, to put in concrete terms the idea that intermediaries are regularly conducting “private speech regulation,” \(^\text{19}\) and to better understand the conceptual discussion of content governance, this article outlines the chain of digital intermediaries that make up the Internet’s basic infrastructure, shedding new light on the chain by employing a classification system developed originally to discuss different types of intermediaries and how they facilitate speech. \(^\text{20}\) This article uses the same classifications to discuss how the intermediaries can constrain speech. It also places these discussions in the context of affirmative First Amendment theory, which says the highest purpose of freedom of expression is to maximize individual participation in the public discourse. Finally, this article concludes by commenting on the history of corporate power over the public discourse, and by calling on intermediaries to be transparent regarding their content-governance practices.

## II. CONTENT GOVERNANCE AND THE “NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE”

The Internet exists on an infrastructure of privately owned websites, servers, and routers, without which the ordinary Internet user would have little or no practical ability to speak or be heard online. \(^\text{21}\) These intermediaries transport, host, and index billions of

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\(^\text{19}\) Benesch & MacKinnon, \textit{supra} note 10.


\(^\text{21}\) \textit{Id.} at 377.
pages of content, enabling them to exercise private power over all manner of speech. Correspondingly, that power has made the intermediaries attractive targets for regulators, litigants, and others who want to censor speech that they find disagreeable. This creates a threat to the global system of free expression because intermediaries “are capable of exercising authority over wrongdoers who are otherwise unreachable because [they] are not capable of being identified, are beyond the jurisdiction of the state, or are . . . not amenable to legal pressure.” Because intermediaries generally have a fragile commitment to the speech they intermediate, the threat to free speech is very real: “[R]evenue from each marginal customer is small and the cost of a legal defense . . . is high, [so] it is almost always cheaper for the intermediary to remove speech than to expend time or resources contesting even meritless claims.”

In some respects, of course, this is not a new phenomenon. Private parties have always influenced speech: Neighbors passed information by word of mouth, courier systems distributed news and information written on papyrus, the optical telegraph passed messages across Europe, and newspaper or book editors decided what the public should see and hear. All of which means the phenomenon of intermediaries is not new, but the Internet’s extensive reliance on them, and the public’s extensive use of the Internet, has had the effect of significantly amplifying the intermediaries’ power. With that in mind, this section examines the emergence of the “networked public sphere” that has distributed the production of expression and renegotiated power relationships among individuals, state actors, and digital intermediaries.

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22 Benesch & MacKinnon, supra note 10.
24 Ardia, supra note 20, at 378–79.
25 Kreimer, supra note 23, at 28.
26 Ardia, supra note 20, at 382.
27 Id. at 378.
28 BENKLER, supra note 18, at 212.
This so-called “networked public sphere” has afforded individuals enormous potential simultaneously to create and consume content that is political, cultural, social, and commercial in nature.\(^{29}\) It has “produced a quantitative change in the number of entry points to the sphere of highly distributed expression such that . . . [t]he nation state has lost its complete control as the administrator of the freedom of expression.\(^{30}\) Whereas constitutional and statutory law once dominated the parameters of what citizens could say and the public forums in which they could say it, digital intermediaries have created virtual public forums whose norms are defined by private companies and whose discourse has become difficult for governments to control.

Meanwhile, the power of the intermediaries facilitating the networked communication environment has increased relative to that of individuals, as individuals have grown dependent on the intermediaries to exercise their creative agency.\(^{31}\) Thus, although the right of individuals to freedom of expression is still defined vis-à-vis state actors, the functions of freedom of expression—distribution of content and access to information—depend on the digital intermediaries,\(^{32}\) which in turn have enabled more people to enjoy the functions of freedom of expression than at any time in history.\(^{33}\) As a result, the intermediaries’ capacity to control those

\(^{29}\) Axel Bruns, BLOGS, WIKIPEDIA, SECOND LIFE, AND BEYOND: FROM PRODUCTION TO PRODUSAGE 19 (2008).


\(^{32}\) See Laura DeNardis, Hidden Levels of Internet Control, 15 Info., Comm. & Soc’y 720 (2012); Laura DeNardis, THE GLOBAL WAR FOR INTERNET GOVERNANCE 153 (2014).

\(^{33}\) See generally ELLIOT KING, FREE FOR ALL: THE INTERNET’S TRANSFORMATION OF JOURNALISM (2010); BENKLER, supra note 18; Bruns, supra note 29 (extolling the power that interactive online platforms have given
functions actually threatens the individuals’ capacity to realize them.

This article shows that intermediary censorship comes in all shapes and sizes, from state actors blocking user access to search engines, to web-hosting services removing content in response to user complaints. That is notable because the concept of speech constraint, discussed in this section, refers to the constraining effects that entities have on the “relative capacity of individuals to be the authors of their lives,” and “whether the sources of constraint are private actors or public law is irrelevant.”\(^{34}\) Within this framework, individuals have pride of place, and any undue constraint of individual communicative agency is seen as undesirable. Of course, what counts as “undue” is disputed. The networked communication environment has made it possible for individuals to create harmful content (e.g., revenge pornography),\(^{35}\) leading some scholars to call for action by both state actors and digital intermediaries to mitigate the harmful effects.\(^{36}\) The result is that individuals, digital intermediaries, and state actors are in a major struggle to define the norms of freedom of expression in a networked environment\(^{37}\)—and the concept of content governance is at the heart of that struggle.

Governing content is about controlling the technologies facilitating individual agency and assigning meaning to those technologies,\(^{38}\) which must be analyzed through a “techno-social

\(^{34}\) BENKLER, supra note 18, at 141.

\(^{35}\) See Danielle Keats Citron & Mary Anne Franks, Criminalizing Revenge Porn, 49 WAKE FOREST L. REV. 345, 346 (2014) (defining revenge porn as “the distribution of sexually graphic images of individuals without their consent.”).


\(^{38}\) Ganaele Langlois, Participatory Culture and the New Governance of Communication: The Paradox of Participatory Media, 14 TELEVISION & NEW MEDIA 91, 100 (2013); LAWRENCE LESSIG, CODE: VERSION 2.0 293 (2006).
lens,” 39 one that recognizes that society and technology are co-determining 40 and seeks to understand the human values programmed into technology. 41 For those reasons, this section critiques scholarship on individual agency and intermediary control in the context of networked communication, synthesizing those areas to understand how the concepts of control and freedom of expression are being defined. The scope of this analysis is broad and at the institutional level, examining how intermediaries and state actors control content and ultimately shape the norms of freedom of expression. Throughout this analysis, the focus is on user content because it implicates individual agency as well as social and political values, and its potentially harmful nature often triggers removal actions. 42

A. Agency, Dependence, and Contested Space in Networked Communication

This section explores scholarship on individual agency and dependence in the context of networked communication. One goal is to capture how and why the increasingly distributed production of expression has renegotiated power relationships among individuals, state actors, and digital intermediaries. 43 This renegotiation is recasting the theme of content governance as one of interdependence among these three stakeholders, while acknowledging that theoretical power imbalances do exist in certain areas of the networked communication system. The other goal in this section is to highlight that such power imbalances reinforce the argument that the networked communication system is a contested space and that content governance plays a critical role in how state actors, digital intermediaries, and individuals define the norms of networked communication.

41 See, e.g., TARLETON GILLESPIE, *WIRED SHUT* 74 (2007).
42 DEIBERT & ROHOFZINSKI, supra note 31, at 4.
1. Conceptualizing Content Governance and Individual Agency

The concept of content governance resides in a web of scholarly literatures. Therefore, it is useful first to situate the concept within the broader field of private governance of communication. The broader field’s literature is far from new. Scholars with roots in the works of philosophers Karl Marx and Michel Foucault, mainly from the critical-cultural vein of the field of mass communication, have theorized that private media companies make up a regime of hegemonic control over individuals’ capacity to participate in the public discourse. In turn, post-positivist scholars have criticized those theories for their lack of empirical proof. The goal here, then, is to synthesize theories from multiple fields in order to explicate the concept of content governance and to understand its implications.

Content governance is nested in a relatively recent conception of the field of private governance of communication: Internet governance, a large field that includes data privacy, net neutrality, deep-packet inspection, and the policing of child-abuse images online. The object of study connecting those dots is “the design and administration of the technologies necessary to keep the Internet operational and the enactment of substantive policy around

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44 Id. at 42.
47 See, e.g., DE NARDIS, THE GLOBAL WAR FOR INTERNET GOVERNANCE, supra note 32.
48 Id. at 11; see also Michel van Eeten & Milton Mueller, Where is the Governance in Internet Governance?, 15:5 NEW MEDIA & SOC’y 720 (2012); Malte Ziewitz & Christian Pentzold, In Search of Internet Governance: Performing Order in Digitally Networked Environments, 16:2 NEW MEDIA & SOC’y 306 (2014).
these technologies." Generally, the Internet governance field has identified a trend toward the “privatization of authority” in key features of Internet technology, and a current debate in the field involves the definition of that private authority. Scholarly attention has been dedicated to global institutions governing the Internet, such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), and the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). However, scholars have called for the concept of “Internet governance” to apply more broadly to include the “many real-world activities that actually shape and regulate the way the Internet works.”

That decision is important because if the field were broadened, it would permit scholars to study the role that digital intermediaries play in governing how individuals use networked communication to participate in the global public discourse. Intermediaries can be classified into several distinct types, depending on their function in networked communication. The digital intermediaries discussed in this section are “single-firm industry platforms” that facilitate networked communication activities. The platform metaphor is appropriate because the intermediaries support individual users and their agency, yet the user content published on the platforms is

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50 See Deibert and Rohozinski, supra note 31, at 12; see also Rebecca MacKinnon, Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle for Internet Freedom (2012).
51 DeNardis, Hidden Levels of Internet Control, supra note 32; Dawn Nunziato, Freedom of Expression, Democratic Norms, and Internet Governance, 52 Emory L. J. 187 (2003).
52 DeNardis, supra note 32; see infra section III.
53 See infra section III.
55 It is worth mentioning here that within the chain of digital intermediaries discussed in the next section, content hosts—specifically third-party platforms—represent the link in the chain that best connects with this article’s conceptual exploration of content governance and affirmative First Amendment theories. A third-party platform is a type of single-firm industry platform.
56 See infra section III.
created within frameworks created by the intermediaries. The companies that own the platforms set the norms of the communicative activities that take place on the platforms. However, the companies do not create such norms in a vacuum. They respond to “pressures from . . . users that they choose to respect” when creating their terms of use, speech policies, and community standards. Thus, the process of creating speech norms on platforms is dialogical, though the true extent of individuals’ influence over the norms remains an open question.

The concepts of agency and agency facilitation are important to understanding how speech norms are negotiated on platforms. These terms are also central to the meaning of freedom of expression in a networked society, so it is helpful to consider how the network empowers individuals in unique and meaningful ways. First, the network structure increases agency by increasing the size of the audience that individuals can reach. For example, the structure can turn individual agency into collective action, thereby affording enormous power to social movements. Second, platforms typically offer user-friendly design, ensuring that many individuals with low or moderate levels of technical literacy can contribute to online discourse. Third, the informal nature of content production and consumption has become normalized. As small-scale amateur cultural production is growing more visible

59 Claffy & Clark, supra note 55, at 466.
60 DEIBERT & ROHOZINSKI, supra note 31, at 3.
and institutional, individuals are asserting themselves as key players in the network. Fourth, networked communication fully harnesses the “necessarily participatory” nature of the creation of culture. That is significant because “[h]ow culture is produced is . . . an essential ingredient in structuring how freedom and justice are perceived, conceived, and pursued.” Thus, freedom of expression, democratic participation, and the creation of culture are all interdependent and active concepts in a system of networked communication.

However, some scholars are skeptical of how much communicative agency individuals really have—and the extent to which such agency makes a difference in public discourse. These scholars speak of psychological rather than real or empirically observable empowerment among individuals who engage in networked communication. These scholars argue that individuals have a “sense of agency” or “sense of empowerment,” rather than an actual ability to alter public policy through their participation in the public discourse. For example, communication scholar Matthew Hindman has lamented the “popular enthusiasm” for the revolutionizing potential of technology, arguing that the enthusiasm “has made a sober appraisal of the Internet’s complicated political effects more difficult.” Hindman is essentially arguing that it is shortsighted to accept blindly that the Internet is a revolutionary medium that will automatically increase democratic engagement and improve the public discourse simply by increasing access to participate in that discourse. Other factors, such as how that access is controlled and how individuals fluidly define the norms of participating in that

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64 Postigo, supra note 39, at 1166.
65 BENKLER, supra note 18, at 274.
68 Flanagin, Flanagin & Flanagin, supra note 61, at 186.
69 HINDMAN, supra note 66, at 5.
discourse, must be understood before one can assess the true effects of networked communication on the public discourse.

Similarly, in the journalism context, mass communication scholar Brendan Watson has found that Twitter users did not provide alternative perspectives to mainstream news coverage of the 2010 Deep Water Horizon oil spill.\footnote{Brendan Watson, Is Twitter an Alternative Medium? Comparing Gulf Coast Twitter and Newspaper Coverage of the 2010 BP Oil Spill, 43 COMM. RES. 647, 666 (2016).} In other words, Twitter may not be so revolutionary a medium in journalism, at least in terms of its ability to further alternative perspectives to major events and thus expand the range of the public discourse. All told, these scholars believe that individual communicative agency should not be thought of in extremes; networked communications are neither revolutionary nor simply normalizing the status quo.\footnote{Scott Wright, Politics as Usual? Revolution, Normalization and a New Agenda for Online Deliberation, 14 NEW MEDIA & SOC’Y 244, 257 (2012).} Rather, user agency is complex,\footnote{van Dijck, supra note 31, at 42.} and the only way to understand it is through careful, nuanced study.

2. Dependence

The notion of dependence is integral to understanding the concept of content governance. Individuals increasingly depend on the Web as their main source of consuming and sharing information,\footnote{Dawn C. Nunziato, Virtual Freedom: Net Neutrality and Free Speech in the Internet Age 2 (2009); Deibert & Rohozinski, supra note 31, at 7.} and digital intermediaries increasingly play an indispensable role in facilitating individuals’ communicative agency.\footnote{Goldsmith & Wu, supra note 31, at 70.} In this context, scholars have sought to understand the role that platforms play in “steering” or “channeling” their users’ agency.\footnote{van Dijck, supra note 31, at 43; Langlois, supra note 62, at 102.} The process of channeling is at the heart of the meaning of agency and freedom of expression in a networked environment, pitting powerful media against speakers and audiences.\footnote{Lievrouw, supra note 40, at 307.} How those concepts are defined affects the very nature of democratic
discourse online. Indeed, new media scholar Ganaele Langlois believes the agency-dependency balance could “pervert the very democratic ideals of free and unfettered communication on which the Internet is based.”77 She is referring to the vision of the Internet captured in 1996 by Internet philosopher John Perry Barlow, who argued in his manifesto “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” that the Internet should be a realm free from the laws of the world of “flesh and steel.”78 As the Internet evolved and became popularized through the invention of the Web, Barlow’s extreme libertarian vision quickly became unrealistic.79 Yet the spirit of Barlow lives on among his contemporaries, who readily criticize the instrumental role that private companies play in networked communication. For example, legal scholar Jonathan Zittrain has argued that the private powers that have come to dominate the Internet have both expanded and constrained individuals’ online communicative agency.80

Especially germane to this article is the vein of Internet governance research addressing “the evolution of the technical and transactional infrastructures concealed beneath content and how these infrastructures potentially constrain the future of individual civil liberties,” such as freedom of expression. 81 Internet governance scholar Laura DeNardis has written that freedom of expression depends on the Internet’s infrastructure as well as the “policies enacted to preserve both liberty and infrastructure reliability.”82 Similarly, legal scholar Jack Balkin has written that the practical ability to speak online depends on an infrastructure of

77 Langlois, supra note 38, at 95.
79 GOLDSMITH & WU, supra note 31; LESSIG, supra note 38.
82 DeNARDIS, THE GLOBAL WAR FOR INTERNET GOVERNANCE, supra note 32 at 17.
laws, technologies, and corporate practices. He says that as our “lives are increasingly dominated by information technology and information flows,” the First Amendment, with its narrow focus on government restrictions of speech, will grow “increasingly irrelevant to the key free speech battles of the future.”

In other words, going forward, democratic values will be as important as ever, but the critical decisions affecting the ability to speak freely online will not involve courts or constitutional law—they will involve technological design, company practices, statutes and regulations, and user activities. That means digital intermediaries have reached “the front lines of . . . governance issues in cyberspace,” and studying them is essential to understanding their role in shaping norms of freedom of expression. To that end, this article critiques Professor DeNardis’s three categories of content governance—and it adds a fourth category that reflects the changing networked environment.

i. Discretionary Governance

Commercial intermediaries may voluntarily remove content from their platforms in the absence of a user complaint, a practice called “discretionary” governance. This form of governance is rare because intermediaries typically remove content in response to complaints or pressure from individuals or governments. Google exercised discretionary governance after Innocence of Muslims provoked protests in the Middle East. Despite its rarity, this governance type illustrates not only an intermediary’s power to

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84 Id.
85 Id.
86 DeNardis, The Global War for Internet Governance, supra note 32, at 156.
87 Id. at 158. DeNardis uses the term “discretionary censorship,” but we replace “censorship” with “governance” for two reasons. The first comes from a desire to highlight the central place of the term “governance” in this analysis and its connection to scholarship on private governance. Second, the term “censorship” is problematic because it typically connotes state control over speech.
88 Id.
restrict individuals’ speech for its own reasons but also the generally limited means for those users to hold an intermediary accountable for abuses of that power. Drawing on legal scholar Yochai Benkler’s broad definition of constraint, such unchecked intermediary speech control threatens online public discourse and therefore needs to be better understood.

Some scholars have adopted the gatekeeping metaphor—once reserved for the editorial processes of journalism—to describe the function of intermediaries as ultimate deciders of what information individuals can access and what user content reaches the public discourse. This metaphor is helpful because gatekeeping exemplifies a “regime of control.” The challenge for journalists of sifting and curating information and user content supplies an analogy for studying the challenges faced by digital intermediaries. Mass media scholar Jane Singer says that online news sites perform a “secondary gatekeeping” function by judging the value of user content for redistribution. The sites’ decision-making factors usually include the content’s appropriateness as well as redistribution’s potential effects on the site’s bottom line.

Similarly, mass communication scholars Joshua Braun and Tarleton Gillespie have studied the gatekeeping function of online news sites and their moderation of user comments, which are often “unpolished, wide-ranging, and unpredictable.” In creating policies for managing “what is sometimes an unruly dialogue,” the sites must ensure that their policies “not only be practical and enforceable, but also balance the economic, professional, and ideological aspirations of the news organization.” Importantly,

89 ETHAN ZUCKERMAN, Intermediary Censorship, in ACCESS CONTROLLED: THE SHAPING OF POWER, RIGHTS, AND RULE IN CYBERSPACE 71 (Ronald Deibert et al., eds., 2012).
90 See, e.g., PAMELA J. SHOEMAKER & TIMOTHY P. VOS, GATEKEEPING THEORY (2009).
91 HINDMAN, supra note 66, at 12.
93 Id.
95 Id. at 384.
“[t]he content policies and their enforcement must toe the line between avoiding legal liability, keeping an eye on the economic bottom line, and some kind of commitment to protecting their users’ freedom of speech and the vibrancy of the public discourse they produce.”96 With so many factors to consider, it is challenging for the news sites to distinguish valuable and invaluable speech.97

Those realities can be projected onto the broader issue of content governance. Digital intermediaries such as YouTube and Twitter face even more challenging decisions in governing user content compared to those of journalistic institutions, because the boundaries that the digital intermediaries police through content governance are broader and less defined. Digital intermediaries have their own message and image they want to project, but those messages and images compete with the millions of others that individuals publish daily on their platforms. These intermediaries, therefore, must find the proper balance between promoting the speech of their users and protecting their own brands by not allowing speech to become so unruly that it causes an exodus of users.

ii. Delegated Governance

This is the second category of content governance. Public officials who want to suppress speech can pressure intermediaries to do it for them, a practice called “delegated” governance.98 The ease and efficiency of using intermediaries to restrict speech offers governments a back door for state-sponsored censorship. Some scholars view this governance type as the most pernicious because of the state actors’ lack of transparency in utilizing it.99 In a 2012

96 Id. at 385.
97 Id. at 392.
98 DeNARDIS, THE GLOBAL WAR FOR INTERNET GOVERNANCE supra note 32, at 213; DeNardis calls this “delegated censorship.” We call it “delegated governance” for the same reasons given in footnote 87.
99 Intermediaries, for their part, have been more willing to be transparent about the requests they receive from governments to remove content. See, e.g., Requests to Remove Content from Governments, GOOGLE TRANSPARENCY REPORT, http://www.google.com/transparencyreport/removals/government/?hl=en (last visited Sept. 7, 2016); Removal Requests, TWITTER TRANSPARENCY
collection of essays, digital technology scholars Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski warned that the biggest threat to free speech today does not come from government efforts to censor or filter content that its citizens or subjects create.\textsuperscript{100} Rather, the biggest threat comes from collaborations between governments and commercial platforms to manage user content (e.g., entering into an agreement whereby the platform identifies and removes certain content at the government’s behest).\textsuperscript{101} Deibert and his coauthors argue that hybrid private-public content governance is becoming the new norm for controlling the public discourse.\textsuperscript{102} They say that state actors “no longer fear pariah status by openly declaring their intent to regulate and control cyberspace,” because they couch their need for control in terms of protecting their citizens from harm.\textsuperscript{103} Meanwhile, intermediaries are likely to heed government pressure to ensure that they can continue to operate in those countries.\textsuperscript{104} All of which threatens individuals’ chances to engage in democratic discourse via intermediaries.\textsuperscript{105}

Figure 1 presents a model of delegated content governance in the system of networked communication. Individuals simultaneously publish and consume speech via an intermediary. However, when an individual publishes content a state actor deems objectionable, the actor notifies the intermediary by flagging the content.\textsuperscript{106} Intermediary employees or contractors then review the

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\textsuperscript{100} See \textsc{Deibert} \& \textsc{Rohozinski}, supra note 31, at 6.

\textsuperscript{101} An example is the agreement between United Kingdom Prime Minister David Cameron’s government and major Internet service providers (ISPs) in the UK to filter by default all content that the government considers “pornographic.” See David Cameron, Prime Minister, United Kingdom, Address to Nat’l Soc’y for the Prevention of Cruelty to Child (July 22, 2013), https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-internet-and-pornography-prime-minister-calls-for-action).

\textsuperscript{102} See \textsc{Deibert} \& \textsc{Rohozinski}, supra note 31, at 11-12.

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Id.} at 4.

\textsuperscript{104} See \textsc{Zuckerman}, supra note 89, at 79-80.

\textsuperscript{105} \textsc{Mackinnon}, supra note 50, at 13-14.

content to determine whether it must be removed because, for example, it violates the law or disrupts the platform’s business interests in the state actor’s polity. If the intermediary removes the content, that content, represented below by the dashed lines and which was once visible to other individuals, will become invisible via the intermediary.

Figure 1: Delegated Content Governance

### iii. Governance Through Legal Compliance

This is the third category of content governance, in which legal violations trigger content governance. For example, in the United States, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (“DMCA”) governs the illegal use of copyrighted material as applied to user content.\(^\text{107}\) Under the DMCA’s notice-and-takedown regime, rights-holders can give an intermediary notification that their copyrighted works are being published through the intermediary without permission. The intermediary must remove the content within 10 business days to avoid liability for vicarious or contributory infringement.\(^\text{108}\)


\(^\text{108}\) 17 U.S.C. § 512(g)(2)(B) (2012). The intermediary must notify the alleged rights-violators of the takedown (§ 512(g)(2)(C) (2012)), and these authors can file a counter notice with the intermediary claiming that their use of the original work was not infringing (§ 512(g)(3) (2012)).
Outside the United States, governments can notify intermediaries when their hosted content violates local laws and request that the content be removed.\textsuperscript{109}

This governance type is similar theoretically to delegated governance. However, in practice, this type is distinct because (1) it is generally transparent, and (2) it is usually clear that the content at issue violates statutory law (e.g., a copyright violation through DMCA) or an explicit constitutional test (e.g., the obscenity standard outlined in \textit{Miller v. California}).\textsuperscript{110}

Certainly, governance through legal compliance could be seen as less a matter of private governance than of following the law in the nations where intermediaries operate. However, understanding this type is important because it highlights the intermediaries’ legal \textit{and} market incentives to remove or otherwise regulate unlawful content in various countries, including the United States.

\textit{iv. Governance by Crowd}

This is the fourth category of content governance, and this article adds it to Professor DeNardis’s list. A crowd of individuals online can compel digital intermediaries to remove unpopular content, something that legally they could not do in a traditional public forum, such as a public park or town square.\textsuperscript{111} For example, members of a crowd sometimes compel police officers to silence a speaker by threatening violence in response to the person’s speech,

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\textsuperscript{109} An example is the Brazilian judiciary’s power to send takedown notices to foreign platforms, such as YouTube, requesting the removal of content that is allegedly defamatory or racist. \textit{See Raphael Spuldar, On the Ground: São Paulo, INDEX ON CENSORSHIP} (Mar. 20, 2013), http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/03/on-the-ground-sao-paulo/.
\textsuperscript{110} \textit{DeNARDIS, THE GLOBAL WAR FOR INTERNET GOVERNANCE supra} note 32, at 213; \textit{see also} Miller v. California, 413 U.S. 15, 24 (1973) (holding that content is obscene and lacking First Amendment protection if it appeals to prurient interests, depicts sexual or scatological functions in a patently offensive manner, and lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value).
\end{flushright}
an unlawful and unconstitutional practice known as the “heckler’s veto.”\textsuperscript{112}

This governance type is arguably the most important to understand because mainstream intermediaries, such as Facebook and YouTube, rely on users’ flagging of undesirable content to be made aware of it.\textsuperscript{113} Individuals can also pressure intermediaries by publicizing their grievances over undesirable content. Indeed, Facebook removed numerous pages with misogynistic titles (e.g., “Dropkicking sluts in the teeth”) after a group of activists ran a grassroots campaign asking companies to remove their ads from Facebook if the social-networking site refused to remove the misogynistic pages.\textsuperscript{114}

Figure 2 presents a model of governance by crowd. Flagging follows essentially the same process as that for state actors. The main difference is that flagging comes from within the community served by the intermediary instead of from outside the community. Also, rather than deciding whether the flagged content violates the law, intermediaries in Figure 2 must decide whether the flagged content violates their community’s speech standards. That means this governance type involves the pressuring of intermediaries to follow a set of community norms that may amount to a “heckler’s veto” over some speech.\textsuperscript{115} Reaching a normative conclusion about whether such pressure is desirable requires a greater understanding of the competing values embedded in this governance type: protecting extreme speech and preventing harm.

\textsuperscript{112} Id.; see also Brett G. Johnson, The Heckler’s Veto: Using First Amendment Theory and Jurisprudence to Understand Current Audience Reactions Against Controversial Speech, 21 COMM. LAW & POL’Y 175, 175–77 (2015).

\textsuperscript{113} See Crawford & Gillespie, supra note 106.


\textsuperscript{115} See Johnson, supra note 112, at 214; see also ROBERT POST, CONSTITUTIONAL DOMAINS 144 (1995) (contending that the main goal of the First Amendment is to promote “critical interaction” among groups with conflicting opinions and values by preventing the government from invoking community norms to silence extreme speech).
B. Interdependence

Understanding the economic pressures that intermediaries face is critical for conceiving a system in which individuals, intermediaries, and state actors are interdependent, rather than one in which individuals are dependent on intermediaries. In the networked-economy context, neither stakeholder can function well without the other. Individuals and intermediaries alike demand a participatory culture. Motivating production is an important goal for platforms because “giving users more power over content . . . add[s] business value[,]” and the creation of user content often generate[s] valuable information as a byproduct. That is, intermediaries facilitating user content typically pedal the

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117 van Dijck, supra note 31, at 42.
118 Id. at 46; see also Ute Schaedel & Michel Clement, Managing the Online Crowd: Motivations for Engagement in User-Generated Content, 7 J. OF MEDIA BUS. STUDIES 17, 19 (2010).
prospects of fame, entertainment, and play, all in return for commoditizing users’ personal data and content.\textsuperscript{120}

Scholars have been critical of this “Faustian bargain” that individuals are forced to make.\textsuperscript{121} Professor Langlois says it is clear evidence that the power dynamics within commercial participatory media on the Web are “both repressive and productive.”\textsuperscript{122} She laments that “the ease of communication, connection and exploration of one’s interests can only take place through agreeing to terms of service and terms of use that allow for [surveillance of personal data] and the commercialization of user-generated content through advertising.”\textsuperscript{123} In this system, digital intermediaries that host user content likely have a propensity to view offensive content as risky because of its potential to alienate users and lead to lost subscriptions, while copyright-infringing content creates a risk of legal liability.\textsuperscript{124}

Figure 3 presents an interdependence model for a system of networked communication. The arrows represent pressure that each actor puts on the others. Individuals can act as checks on the government through their speech.\textsuperscript{125} However, individuals depend on digital intermediaries to realize that checking function, because the intermediaries, of course, facilitate the speech. At the same time, individuals provide intermediaries a revenue source through commoditization of their content, meaning that intermediaries risk subscription and business losses if their speech restrictions are too great. Governments, meanwhile, can check the individuals’ checking power by creating public laws to regulate speech and to influence intermediaries’ behavior (e.g., the DMCA).\textsuperscript{126} The United

\textsuperscript{120} Schaedel & Clement, supra note 118, at 22–23; van Dijck, supra note 31, at 50.
\textsuperscript{121} Michael Zimmer, The Externalities of Search 2.0: The Emerging Privacy Threats when the Drive for the Perfect Search Engine Meets Web 2.0, 13 FIRST MONDAY 3 (2008).
\textsuperscript{122} Langlois, supra note 62, at 11.
\textsuperscript{123} Id. at 2.
\textsuperscript{124} Lobato, Thomas & Hunter, supra note 63, at 912.
\textsuperscript{126} For example, in 2008, news organizations filed DMCA takedown requests to have YouTube remove videos that individual users had made, using the news
States Congress also immunized intermediaries from liability for user content through the Communications Decency Act (CDA), a reflection of the intermediaries’ power over governments. They are economic engines, according to the CDA’s preamble, which states that its intent is “to preserve the vibrant and competitive free market that presently exists for the Internet and other interactive computer services, unfettered by Federal or State regulation.”

Figure 3: Interdependence in Networked Communication

In this interdependent system, the power of speech is only as strong as its counter powers allow it to be, and in the United States, the First Amendment moderates the government’s power to constrain speech. So, in a system of networked communication in the United States, digital intermediaries are the entities with the greatest capacity to constrain individuals’ speech. But, unlike government power over individuals, intermediary power is not

organizations’ footage, to support or criticize candidates in the 2008 elections. Although some of the videos may have constituted fair use of the footage, the DMCA gives intermediaries a strong incentive to remove allegedly infringing content to avoid liability for vicarious infringement. This provision has led some to criticize the DMCA for its potential to unduly punish legitimate speech on matters of public concern. See, e.g., Campaign Takedown Troubles: How Meritless Copyright Claims Threaten Online Political Speech, CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY AND TECHNOLOGY (Sept. 2010), https://cdt.org/files/pdfs/copyright_takedowns.pdf.

necessarily constant. Any number of factors may cause it to wax and wane, such as economic or legal developments, or changing social norms regarding speech. All of which is to say: just as legal scholars explore how the First Amendment limits the government’s power to restrict speech, mass communication scholars must explore how digital intermediaries can act as arbiters of free speech—and how extralegal factors can and do limit their power.

III. THE CHAIN OF DIGITAL INTERMEDIARIES

To put in concrete terms the proposition that intermediaries are regularly conducting “private . . . speech regulation,” and to better understand the previous section’s conceptual discussion of content governance, this section outlines the chain of digital intermediaries that make up the Internet’s basic infrastructure. This section sheds new light on the chain by employing a classification system developed by legal scholar David Ardia to discuss different types of intermediaries and how they facilitate speech. Here, the same classifications are used to discuss how the intermediaries can constrain speech. The classifications are: (1) communication conduits, which transport data across the network; (2) content hosts, which “store, cache, or otherwise provide access to third-party content;” and (3) search and application providers, which index and filter content without necessarily hosting it. They are explained and applied in the subparts below.

A. Communication Conduits

These intermediaries facilitate the transport of speech, and typically they have limited control over—and no direct knowledge of—the content of the speech they transport. In the offline world, examples include telephone companies that intermediate voice traffic and mail carriers that intermediate print materials.

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128 See generally LESSIG, supra note 38.
130 Ardia, supra note 20, at 386.
131 Id. at 386–98
132 Id. at 386–87.
133 Id.
online world, examples include Internet service providers, upstream providers, and the Domain Name System, all of which intermediate access to content by transporting data across the network. They have become attractive targets for all kinds of speech constraint.

1. Internet Service Providers

Anyone who uses the Internet must access it through a service provider called an ISP. It is the user’s entry point responsible for making web content accessible. An ISP is supported by backbone providers that simply transmit data and “have no direct relationship with the actors at either endpoint.” Because of the functions it performs, an ISP can operate as a speech constraint in numerous ways. First, even in nations where intermediaries are mostly shielded from liability for user-generated content, some ISPs routinely disconnect users or remove their content rather than expend resources to defend content that has drawn complaints. Second, governments and rights-holders can pressure ISPs to cut off a user’s Internet access after the user has received multiple notifications of copyright infringement. Third, authoritarian governments have used ISPs to restrict their citizens from accessing the network in their countries, typically to quell dissent.

In 2011, for example, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, in response to street protests, ordered the country’s six ISPs to go offline, knocking out Internet access for five days. Vodafone,

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134 Id.
135 Ardia, supra note 20, at 386–87.
136 Id. at 387.
138 See, e.g., David Kravets, ISPs Now Monitoring for Copyright Infringement, WIRED (Feb. 25, 2013), https://www.wired.com/2013/02/copyright-scofflaws-beware/.
139 Kreimer, supra note 23, at 18-21.
one of the ISPs, issued a statement saying “Egyptian authorities” had demanded that the company “turn down the network totally.” Later, Vodafone issued a statement saying that authorities had used the country’s emergency laws to require the company to send scripted pro-government text messages to its customers. In other words, the government shut down the Internet, then spread propaganda using a different technology—at once making it difficult for Egyptians to communicate and to verify the claims made in the propaganda.

2. Upstream Providers

A variation on the theme of targeting an ISP is targeting its cousin, an upstream provider. They come in two basic forms: (1) A large ISP that provides Internet access to a local ISP, and (2) a server leased by a third-party platform to host its site. In either form, the provider’s function is to transfer data from the client to the server, creating different chokepoint threats than those created by source and destination ISPs, discussed above. In the chain of intermediaries, the farther from the user a provider is located (upstream providers are at least one layer removed from users), the smaller a provider’s incentive to resist any pressure to censor a user’s speech. The reason is the cost of defending speech tends to be more than upstream providers charge any customer, so they often take the cheaper option of removing content or deactivating users. This can affect not only the targeted user but also any number of collateral users.

143 Id.
145 Id.
146 Id.
147 Kreimer, supra note 23, at 16.
Imagine that a service is hosting a website whose content triggers a takedown request. The service relies on an upstream provider for access to Internet users, and it hosts many sites other than the one whose content triggered the request. In response, the upstream provider could shut down the web-hosting service’s entire connection, taking down the site that triggered the takedown and innocent bystanders, other sites hosted by the service. That very thing happened in 2009, when the United States Chamber of Commerce attempted to silence a parody site created by “The Yes Men,” a group that stages pranks to call attention to corporate misbehavior.\(^\text{148}\)

Reporters received a press release saying the Chamber would throw “its weight behind strong climate legislation” at a National Press Club event, but the Chamber was not behind the release.\(^\text{149}\) It was the work of “The Yes Men,” who had also created a parody site to publicize the fake event. The Chamber sent a takedown request to the parody site’s upstream provider, claiming the site infringed the Chamber’s intellectual property rights by “directly copying the images, logos, design, and layout of the Chamber’s . . . official website . . . .”\(^\text{150}\) The upstream provider shut down the entire connection to the hosting service, which supported not only “The Yes Men” but also 400 other sites. They were all shut down.

3. **Domain Name System**

The Domain Name System (“DNS”) converts “human-readable host names and domain names, such as Yahoo.com, into the machine-readable, numerical Internet Protocol [“IP”] addresses of a server . . . used to point [a computer] toward the correct [location] on the Internet.”\(^\text{151}\) DNS is the functional equivalent of a

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\(^{150}\) Sheppard, supra note 148.

\(^{151}\) *Free Speech Domain Name System (DNS)*, ELECTRONIC FRONTIER FOUNDATION, https://www.eff.org/free-speech-weak-link#dns (last visited Aug. 23, 2016); see also Ardia, supra note 20, at 385–86.
directory, making it possible for users to access websites without remembering their IP addresses and server locations. With that in mind, DNS can operate as a speech chokepoint in several ways.

First, ISPs sometimes filter content to restrict access to pornography or websites hosting copyrighted material. ISPs can do so by preventing DNS servers from resolving to the proper IP address a user request for a website. That means the site is still there, but the user cannot access it with the domain name. The problem here is overbreadth: It is often easier for ISPs to block entire domains rather than specific content. In the United Kingdom, for example, the nonprofit Internet Watch Foundation monitors the web for images of child abuse and extreme pornography. When it finds such images, the organization notifies the relevant ISP or domain-name registrar that a bad actor is using the domain. Then, the ISP or registrar is expected to block or de-register the domain in order to protect users from inadvertent exposure to the offending content. The organization claims it has flagged more than 400,000 web pages in 16 years, resulting in the blocking or de-registering of 100,000 domain names. That approach is blunt and overbroad, as it suppresses a domain’s objectionable and unobjectionable content.

Second, in authoritarian countries like Iran and China, officials use DNS to suppress speech they find disagreeable; and in progressive countries like Belgium and Norway, officials use DNS to block sites that distribute child pornography. In the United States, too, DNS has disrupted speech. WikiLeaks was inaccessible for a short time in 2010 after the site’s DNS provider terminated its agreement with WikiLeaks.

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152 Free Speech, supra note 151.
155 Free Speech, supra note 151.
struggling to fend off a Distributed Denial of Service ("DDoS") attack after its release of classified United States embassy cables.\textsuperscript{157} The DNS provider cited the attack as the reason it terminated its WikiLeaks agreement, saying the attack threatened the services it provided for other users.\textsuperscript{158} Without its DNS provider, WikiLeaks existed in the form of partial mirror sites, restricting its ability to operate. Earlier, WikiLeaks had contracted with Amazon Web Services to enhance its "stability and protect itself from DDoS attacks," but Amazon also dropped WikiLeaks because of pressure from the United States government.\textsuperscript{159}

Congress later considered DNS blocking to combat intellectual property infringement, through the Stop Online Piracy Act ("SOPA") introduced in 2011.\textsuperscript{160} It would have created a procedure for blacklisting foreign sites that allegedly hosted rights-infringing content. In theory, the SOPA would have protected rights-holders by using DNS to block access to those sites. However, the bill had fatal flaws.\textsuperscript{161} It empowered the United States attorney general to obtain injunctions against "foreign infringing sites," defined to include any domain registered outside the U.S. that "facilitates" copyright infringement.\textsuperscript{162} The attorney general could obtain the injunction without an adversarial hearing and then order ISPs to block a domain. The attorney general also could sue any party that objected, while non-objecting parties would be immunized.\textsuperscript{163} Thus, the scheme would have created incentives for key elements of the Internet’s infrastructure, including DNS, to act as chokepoints by

\textsuperscript{157} Id.
\textsuperscript{158} Id.
\textsuperscript{163} Id.
assisting the government in blocking access to certain websites.\textsuperscript{164} The SOPA did not pass.\textsuperscript{165}

B. Content Hosts

These intermediaries play a crucial role in the distribution of speech, and their defining characteristic is that they, unlike conduits, generally have knowledge of and control over the content of the speech they intermediate.\textsuperscript{166} In the offline world, examples include bookstores and libraries, which intermediate everything from books to magazines and beyond.\textsuperscript{167} In the online world, examples include web-hosting services and third-party platforms, which store, cache, or otherwise provide access to content, operating between primary publishers and their audiences.\textsuperscript{168} Most speech that occurs online “is stored on or made available from servers owned by private intermediaries” that decide “when, how, and whether to make that speech available to others.”\textsuperscript{169} Web-hosting services allow people to host their own websites, and third-party platforms offer a variety of services, such as social

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{164} Peters, supra note 161.
\textsuperscript{165} Id.
\textsuperscript{166} Ardia, supra note 20, at 398.
\textsuperscript{167} Id.
\textsuperscript{168} Another example worth mentioning here is a payment service provider, which makes it possible for users to send and receive payments online and, in some cases, raise money to support their online speech. Donations through these services can fund everything from political candidates to journalism and poetry. The providers bridge the gaps among senders, financial institutions, and receivers. Thus, the chokepoint threat is that government and private actors can pressure the providers to cut off a speaker’s means of financial support. In 2010, for example, WikiLeaks struggled to cover its operating expenses because PayPal and other payment services bowed to government pressure and stopped processing the organization’s donations. See “Payment Service Providers,” Free Speech: Only as Strong as the Weakest Link, ELECTRONIC FRONTIER FOUNDATION, https://www.eff.org/free-speech-weak-link#payment (last visited Sept. 9, 2016). We mention this type of provider in a footnote because it is a significant link in the chain of digital intermediaries, but it is beyond this article’s scope to describe all of the intermediaries that facilitate communication on the Internet. It is sufficient, we believe, to note the classifications developed by Professor Ardia and provide examples of intermediaries in each one, without purporting to describe every intermediary in the chain.
\textsuperscript{169} Ardia, supra note 20, at 387–88.
\end{footnotesize}
networking, that enable their users to share content. These intermediaries can constrain speech in various ways, and they have become big targets for those who want to suppress speech online.

1. Web-hosting Services

Web-hosting services can be small like Angelfire or large like GoDaddy, and the scope of their services varies significantly, from the hosting of a single webpage with limited file space to the provision of large-scale database support and application-development platforms. Web hosts regularly receive defamation and copyright claims demanding the takedown of hosted material. Some come from companies angry that a host “is providing access to allegedly copyrighted material or to a speaker’s criticism of their corporate practices.” Others come from users upset by what they consider defamatory or offensive content. Put differently, some takedown demands are filed in good faith (e.g., a photographer demanding that a site remove a copyrighted image used without authorization and not constituting fair use), while others wear the scarlet letter of censorship (e.g., a company demanding that a site remove content with the intent of chilling speech). The line between the two can be thin.

In 2006, for example, an anonymous blogger called Spocko published audio clips from a talk-radio program on KSFO-AM in order to criticize what the blogger characterized as the hosts’ “racially insensitive and religiously intolerant rhetoric.” In response, ABC Inc., which owns the radio station and the copyrights to its content, sent a letter to Spocko’s web host claiming that the clips violated the company’s copyrights and demanding that the host direct Spocko to take down the clips. The web host shut down Spocko’s blog, prompting Spocko to find a different host. Then, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a

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171 Id.
173 Id.
nonprofit digital-rights organization, sent a letter to ABC stating that Spocko’s use of the clips—for the purpose of criticizing the radio program—constituted fair use. The letter also stated that “ABC/KSFO’s complaints amount to nothing more than an attempt to silence an effective critic,” warning ABC that it could be liable under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act for misrepresenting a copyright claim. In the end, neither side filed a lawsuit, ABC never responded to the EFF’s letter, and Spocko moved his blog to a new host that promised not to restrict his expressive activities.

2. Third-party Platforms

Google, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are examples of third-party platforms that offer a variety of services that enable their users to share content. When a blogger covering government corruption speaks to the world, he might do so via a blog-hosting service like Tumblr. When an activist organizes a protest, she might do so via a social-networking site like Facebook. When a citizen journalist shares photos and videos of a major press conference, he might do so through hosting sites like Flickr or YouTube. Indeed, for most people, third-party platforms are their principal means of online and public communication. The chokepoint here stems from the reality that the employees who develop and enforce the platforms’ content rules have greater “power over who gets heard around the globe

174 Id.
177 Ardia, supra note 20, at 388.
178 Id.
179 Id.
180 Id.
than any politician or bureaucrat.”182 The rules they develop, along with how they enforce those rules, provide as much a study of arbitrary reasoning as a study of principled reasoning. A full exploration of the practices of third-party platforms is beyond the scope of this article, but consider those of Facebook—the largest third-party platform in the world, in terms of monthly active users.183

Many hundreds of content moderators work around the clock for Facebook to review user complaints about posts that contain nudity, hate speech, pornography, threats, violence, and other supposed evils—working from offices in the United States, Ireland, and India, among others.184 The complaints are voluminous. Each week, Facebook receives more than two million requests to remove content.185 How the company responds to those requests has changed over time, and Dave Willner’s career at Facebook provides a case study in how and why the changes took place. After a few years working in the help center and on content policy, Willner, then twenty-eight years old, became head of Facebook’s content policy team—just six employees at the Menlo Park headquarters.186 Facebook had no content rules when Willner joined that team, so he attempted to write the rules himself.

He began by using university codes as models, and then, frustrated by their vagueness, he sought inspiration from John Stuart Mill’s writings and the First Amendment.187 Willner learned that the latter required a presumption against prior restraints of speech and speech should only be “banned only when it is intended—and likely—to incite imminent violence or lawless

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184 Rosen, supra note 182.

185 Id.

186 Id.

187 Id.
However, he also learned that European free-speech values were more limited, forbidding, for example, speech that “offends the dignity of members of a protected class and lowers their standing in society.” Ultimately, Willner decided that both regimes were too subjective—in large part because his content moderators, in offices around the world, brought to their roles different cultural norms and experiences. They needed rules that focused on “concrete, easily categorized actions.”

To that end, Facebook hired a consulting firm to produce what became the “Operations Manual for Live Content Moderators,” intended to help the diverse street-level moderators respond to removal requests. The seventeen-page manual was leaked in 2012 to Gawker, and it drew wide criticism for its specificity and dubious distinctions. Divided into categories like “Sex and Nudity,” “Hate Content,” and “Graphic Content,” it required content moderators to delete, among other things: “Sex toys or other objects, but only in the context of sexual activity,” “Images of drunk and unconscious people, or sleeping people with things drawn on their face,” and “Photoshopped images of people, whether negative, positive or neutral.” The manual also required moderators to escalate some requests to Willner’s team at headquarters: credible threats against people, suicidal content, incitements to imminent lawless action, and material related to “international compliance,” such as holocaust denial, which is unlawful in some countries. Willner and his team operated as a court of last resort.

Applying those rules proved difficult, and the company’s “zealousness in scrubbing users’ content” produced a number of

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188 Id.; see generally Near v. Minnesota, 283 U.S. 697 (1931).
189 Rosen, supra note 182.
190 Id.
191 Id.
193 Id.
194 Id.
controversies. First, in February 2011, Facebook removed a drawing posted by the New York Academy of Art that depicted a topless woman. Outraged, the school issued a statement: “[We] find it difficult to allow Facebook to be the final arbiter—and online curator—of the artwork we share with the world.” Facebook said the removal was a mistake and apologized. Second, in April 2011, Facebook removed a photo of two gay men kissing, and the company was accused of homophobia. Officials said the removal was a mistake and apologized. Third, in February 2012, a group of women gathered at Facebook’s headquarters to protest the regular removal of breastfeeding photos. Facebook said the removals were a mistake and apologized, revising the company’s content rules to clarify that users, generally, were permitted to post breastfeeding photos.

Amid these and other controversies, Facebook ended its relationship with the consulting firm and abandoned the manual, and Willner “redoubled his efforts to minimize the opportunities for subjective verdicts by his first responders.” Eventually, those efforts led to the adoption of new “Community Standards” governing “what type of expression is acceptable, and what type of content may be reported to us and removed.” Those standards were tested acutely in September 2012, when Facebook refused to block the sharing of Innocence of Muslims. Willner concluded that the video complied with Facebook’s standards because it contained

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195 Id.
197 Id.
199 Id.
201 Id.
202 Rosen, supra note 182.
attacks on an institution, Islam, rather than a group, Muslims.\textsuperscript{204} That distinction was critical under the new standards, which stated: “[p]eople can use Facebook to challenge ideas, institutions, events, and practices,” but Facebook will remove speech “which includes content that directly attacks people based on their . . . religion.”\textsuperscript{205}

Today, Facebook is evolving yet again as a potential chokepoint.\textsuperscript{206} It is partnering with news organizations to enable them to post stories directly to Facebook—instead of providing access to the content through a link.\textsuperscript{207} The partnerships may generate good money for cash-strapped news sites, but they give Facebook the power to play kingmaker, to decide “which news organizations [will] thrive and which will die.”\textsuperscript{208} Moreover, the partnerships give the social-networking site greater control, at least technologically, over some news content. As one commentator put it, “In the future, it may not be the New York Times that the White House pressures to stop publication of a . . . story. [Officials] may . . . head straight for who . . . controls whether millions will actually see the next explosive national security investigation: Facebook.”\textsuperscript{209} That control stems from the company’s content moderation and its algorithms that determine what users see in their feeds. The resulting chokepoint risks are considerable, as the same commentator explains:

\textsuperscript{204} Rosen, \textit{supra} note 182.
\textsuperscript{205} Facebook, \textit{supra} note 203.
\textsuperscript{206} One issue Facebook is confronting as of the writing of this article is how to manage users’ livestreaming video, through the platform’s new Facebook Live feature. It has been used to stream the sniper ambush of police officers in Dallas and the police killing of Philando Castile in Minnesota, among other events. As the New York Times recently reported, “Now Facebook must navigate when, if at all, to draw the line if a live video is too graphic, and weigh whether pulling such content is in the company’s best interests if the video is newsworthy.” See Mike Isaac and Sydney Ember, \textit{Live Footage of Shootings Forces Facebook to Confront New Role}, N.Y Times (Jul. 8, 2016), http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/09/technology/facebook-dallas-live-video-breaking-news.html.
\textsuperscript{208} Id.
\textsuperscript{209} Id.
News organizations have always been at risk of bending to the will of their advertisers—and history is replete of examples of them doing just that. But the changing dynamics around Facebook are of a different order. Standard Oil or Pfizer or General Motors never had the power to ensure millions of New York Times subscribers would not get their paper the next day. Yet with one click, Facebook could pull off the modern-day equivalent.\(^\text{210}\)

Of course, Facebook is not the only third-party platform conducting speech regulation. Google, Twitter, and Instagram, among others, are doing so, too, as they develop and enforce their own content rules.\(^\text{211}\) Facebook is highlighted here as an exemplar, to demonstrate how the “sovereigns of cyberspace”\(^\text{212}\) are writing a major chapter in the story of free speech—how they are capable of operating, for any number of reasons, as chokepoints separating a speaker from its audience.\(^\text{213}\)

C. Search and Application Providers

These intermediaries, by indexing or filtering content, allow people to locate and sort through the digital world’s voluminous information and to direct their attention to that which interests them.\(^\text{214}\) In the online world, examples include search engines and filtering software.\(^\text{215}\) In the offline world, close analogs are not apparent, but the closest would be telephone directories, stock prices, and bond ratings.\(^\text{216}\) In any case, search engines can be major chokepoints because of their importance to Internet users, who generally must employ one to get around the Web. Filtering

\(^{210}\) Id.


\(^{212}\) MacKinnon, supra note 50.

\(^{213}\) Sengupta, supra note 7.

\(^{214}\) Ardia, supra note 20, at 389.

\(^{215}\) Id.

\(^{216}\) Id.
software, by contrast, is a chokepoint by design. The exact nature and extent of their capacities to suppress speech vary. Like content hosts, and unlike communication conduits, these providers have limited knowledge of—and limited control over—the content of the speech they intermediate, insofar as search engines and filtering software select search results based on computer algorithms and thematic preferences representing the engineers’ judgments about which information to present and how to do so.\textsuperscript{217}

\textit{1. Search Engines}

Efforts to manipulate search results can threaten the principle of search neutrality: the idea that users should get the results they want rather than the results an interested party wants them to see.\textsuperscript{218} Those efforts are fueled by governmental and non-governmental actors. First, some authoritarian governments block entire search engines or force them to blacklist certain queries—all to limit access to content that does not support the government’s official version of reality. Until 2010, for example, Google agreed to censor its results in Mainland China.\textsuperscript{219} When the company ended that agreement, Google began routing its Chinese traffic through Hong Kong servers, beyond the reach of Beijing’s censorial laws.\textsuperscript{220} Mainland users could still use Google, but the connection broke if they searched for certain terms.\textsuperscript{221} It was no longer Google doing the censoring, though; it was the Chinese government and the so-called Great Firewall of China.\textsuperscript{222} Notably, in 2012, Google added a feature to its Chinese homepage that warned users when

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{218} Id.


\textsuperscript{221} Id.

\textsuperscript{222} Id.
\end{footnotesize}
they entered sensitive terms that their connection might break.223 The feature, which Google removed one year later without comment, also suggested alternative terms for users to try that would not break the connection.224

Second, industry groups and individuals have realized the potential for search engines to choke off speech. Groups that lobby for copyright enforcement, such as the Motion Picture Association of America, have taken on torrent search indices that are used to distribute files over the Internet at fast speeds, and individuals have claimed that search results that are defamatory or otherwise illegal must be removed.225 For individuals, especially, the chief concern is the Internet’s long memory and the “world of Big Data and ever more powerful search engines, in which it seems almost everything is permanently recorded and accessible to almost anyone.”226 These are the concerns breathing life into the “Right to be Forgotten,” recognized in Argentina and the European Union.227 More generally, such concerns are challenging news outlets in unique ways, even in countries where no “Right to be Forgotten” is recognized.

In the United States, for example, news organizations frequently receive requests to remove archived stories from people who wish to escape the pall cast over them by negative coverage.228 News organizations have little interest in rewriting history, but some, to moderate the Internet’s long memory, have agreed in limited circumstances to insert a line of code into online stories to prevent them from being found by search engines. In other words, the stories “can still be found in the paper’s digital archive, just as

224 Id.
228 Keller, supra note 226.
they can be found in bound volumes at the local library, but they do not show up on Google.”

The implications are significant: without an easy way to find digital information, it might as well not exist.

2. Filtering Software

In its most basic form, filtering software protects users from web-borne malware or spam, and screens out unwanted content. Public schools and libraries use filters to comply with laws requiring them to deny access to adult-oriented or sexually explicit material. Filters, then, are designed to be chokepoints—but their effects can go beyond their design. Indeed, they are susceptible to the problems of overblocking and underblocking. An overblocking filter screens out wanted content, and an underblocking filter fails to screen out unwanted content.

Consider, as an example, a 2012 incident at a Missouri public high school. While conducting research at school, students discovered they could access websites for anti-gay organizations but not websites for pro-gay organizations. They also discovered they could access the Bowers v. Hardwick opinion, in which the Supreme Court upheld a statute criminalizing sodomy, but they could not access the Lawrence v. Texas opinion, in which the Supreme Court invalidated state laws criminalizing sodomy. The culprit: the school’s filtering software, which placed pro-gay organizations in its “sexuality” category, designed to screen out pornography. Meanwhile, the software placed anti-gay organizations in the “religion” category, subject to no

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229 Id.
230 See generally Phillip B. Stark, The Effectiveness of Internet Content Filters, 4 J. L. & POL’Y FOR THE INFO. SOC’Y 411 (2008).
231 Id. at 415.
232 Id.
234 Id.
235 Id.
restrictions. As an American Library Association official told the New York Times, “[F]ilters are a new version of . . . pulling books off the shelf. The difference is, this is much more subtle and harder to identify.”

IV. AGENCY, CONTROL, AND AFFIRMATIVE FIRST AMENDMENT THEORY

The previous two sections discussed content governance conceptually and in concrete terms through an evaluation of the chain of digital intermediaries and of the proposition that they are regularly conducting “private . . . speech regulation.” This section places those discussions in the context of affirmative First Amendment theories, which generally contend that freedom of expression’s highest purpose is to maximize individual participation in the public discourse. Content governance, as a subfield of Internet governance, deserves the sustained attention of the even wider field of mass communication law, consistent with comments from legal scholar Enrique Armijo that networked-communication issues “now establish the frame within which all of our public policy and academic debates concerning communications law and policy take place.” Connecting content governance and mass communication law is difficult, though, and several guidelines must be established to synthesize those fields. Although the traditional practice of mass communication law research has been to draw normative conclusions about freedom-of-expression issues based on a single theoretical framework, it is unwise to draw such conclusions about content governance until the concept can be evaluated from the perspective of multiple theories of freedom of expression. In other words, scholars must be cautious to avoid the pitfalls of advancing normative conclusions unmoored from diverse First Amendment jurisprudence.

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236 Id.
237 Id.
238 Benesch & MacKinnon, supra note 10.
To that end, the starting point is to recognize, again, that digital intermediaries are powerful institutions that can restrict the speech that individuals publish on their platforms. That recognition permits content governance to be assessed using affirmative theories of freedom of expression, such as legal scholar Alexander Meiklejohn’s self-governance theory,241 the “new realist” theories of the 1990s,242 and emerging theories stressing the maximization of individual participation in a networked communication environment.243 The common thread running through these theories is that they all acknowledge the control that powerful non-governmental institutions (e.g., media corporations) can exercise over individuals’ participation in the public discourse. Notably, the theories all acknowledge the potential of state actors to increase the individuals’ power in relation to that of the institutions. The affirmative theories propose various policies that state actors can adopt to advance the maximization of individual participation in the public discourse. Proponents of negative theories of freedom of expression,244 which emphasize freedom from government interference rather than freedom to achieve specific substantive outcomes, have criticized those policies. But it is possible, nonetheless, to accept the premise that media institutions have a great deal of power to control the public discourse. This premise is the foundation for understanding the interdependent nature of content governance from the perspective of legal theory.

A. Affirmative Theory

Affirmative theories of freedom of expression find their roots in Professor Meiklejohn’s self-governance theory.245 Meiklejohn

241 ALEXANDER MEIKLEJOHN, FREE SPEECH AND ITS RELATION TO SELF-GOVERNMENT (1948).
245 Meiklejohn, supra note 241.
argued that the First Amendment’s central purpose was not found in “the words of the speakers, but the minds of the hearers.” He said that the government may not be able to control what people say, but it could guarantee “everything worth saying shall be said.” In other words, freedom of expression is valued chiefly for its essential contribution to deliberative democracy. Not only do other expressive values, such as facilitating individual autonomy, take a back seat to the self-governance value, but also they can be threats to it. To the extent that occurs, affirmative theorists argue that state actors are best equipped to address the threat. Indeed, even economics scholar Ronald Coase, the free-market champion and founder of the field of law and economics, believes “the case for government intervention in the market for ideas is much stronger than it is, in general, in the market for goods.” Put differently, these theorists contend that media corporations have a duty to maintain a diverse and robust public discourse, and if they fail, government must force them to do so. Affirmative theorists, then, generally support state action to remedy threats to democratic participation from private power.

These perspectives should inform any theorizing about the values of, and controls over, freedom of expression in a networked society. Scholars in the field of “Cyberlaw” have debated whether the Internet is subject to the laws of the brick-and-mortar world since the Internet first went public. The consensus today is that such laws can and should apply to the Internet in certain situations, but the larger concern is how extralegal regulatory forms affect the Internet. Legal scholar Lawrence Lessig famously argued that

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246 Id. at 26.
247 Id. at 26.
248 See generally C. EDWIN BAKER, HUMAN LIBERTY AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH 48 (1989) (arguing that the fundamental principle of the First Amendment is to promote “individual self-fulfillment and participation in change, . . . self-realization and self-determination”).
250 See, e.g., GOLDSMITH AND WU, supra note 31; Lastowka, supra note 119; Andrea Braithwaite, ‘Seriously, Get Out’: Feminists on the Forums and the War(craft) on Women, 16 NEW MEDIA & SOC’Y 703 (2014).
251 Ziewitz and Pentzold, supra note 48, at 312.
the Internet could be both liberating and constraining—and that social norms, the economic marketplace, and technological design all had greater power to regulate Internet activities than law.\textsuperscript{252} Focusing on such “law-like effects” \textsuperscript{253} in the network “systematically treat[s] technical decision-making as a source of Internet policy that, in its effects if not its source, now interpenetrates legal policy-making to create the communicative and informational environment in which we live.”\textsuperscript{254}

An example is Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which has increased the salience of the “law-like effects” of intermediaries’ ability to control user content.\textsuperscript{255} The statute states that digital intermediaries hosting third-party content shall not be treated as its publisher or speaker, and the statute grants the intermediaries immunity from civil liability if they voluntarily restrict access to the content, regardless of whether it is protected constitutionally.\textsuperscript{256} Section 230 was intended to foster online expressive activities, not stifle them by incentivizing intermediary control. However, having the capacity to choose whether to exercise control of user content without fear of liability is a powerful legal subsidy that digital intermediaries enjoy. Legal scholar Rebecca Tushnet, echoing the philosophy of Professors Barron \textsuperscript{257} and Sunstein, \textsuperscript{258} believes that Section 230 affords “dominant providers [both] substantial market control”\textsuperscript{259} and a “substantial concentration[] of power over public discourse.”\textsuperscript{260} She has argued that intermediaries “do not generally compete to protect user rights,”\textsuperscript{261} and thus limiting intermediaries’ liability for user

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{252}\textsc{Lessig}, supra note 38.
\bibitem{253}Sandra Braman, \textit{The Interpretation of Technical and Legal Decision-Making for the Internet}, 13 \textsc{Info., Comm. \\& Soc’y} 309, 309 (2010).
\bibitem{254}Id. at 311.
\bibitem{255}Nunziato, supra note 51.
\bibitem{257}Jerome A. Barron, \textit{Access to the Press: A New First Amendment Right}, 80 \textsc{Harv. L. Rev.} 1641 (1967).
\bibitem{258}\textsc{Sunstein}, supra note 242.
\bibitem{260}Id. at 993.
\bibitem{261}Id. at 1004.
\end{thebibliography}
content should require a concomitant limiting of their capacity to control online expressive activities.\textsuperscript{262}

Exactly how that capacity should be limited is the subject of great debate among Internet law scholars. One approach is to treat digital intermediaries as public forums.\textsuperscript{263} The theory is that the intermediaries perform services like those performed by public parks or squares, insofar as individuals use both environments to engage in expressive activities. The implication is that the intermediaries’ speech regulation would be subject to First Amendment analysis. However, this approach has not always prevailed in court. In \textit{Cyber Promotions Inc. v. America Online Inc.},\textsuperscript{264} the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania held that AOL’s email service was not the “functional equivalent” of a public forum.\textsuperscript{265} In other words, AOL was not acting as an agent supplying a forum for communication that state actors would normally make available. The court also held that AOL, unlike cable systems, did not control the “critical pathway” of communication.\textsuperscript{266} Rather, AOL was one of multiple pathways for publishing information online.

Some extol this ruling because, as legal scholar Eric Goldman put it, “[c]onverting private . . . providers into state actors could, paradoxically, limit speech rather than increase it.”\textsuperscript{267} Others say the similarity of digital intermediaries and public forums should be embraced in the conventional sense and that the similarity should guide the formation of free-speech values vis-à-vis intermediaries. Professor Balkin believes the intermediaries are “‘public’ in the sense that their value as networks arises from public participation that produces network effects,”\textsuperscript{268} and he has argued that “digital technologies change the social conditions in which people speak,

\textsuperscript{262}Id. at 1009.
\textsuperscript{263}See Sandra Braman & Stephanie Lynch, \textit{Advantage ISP: Terms of Service as Media Law}, 5 \textit{NEW MEDIA & SOC’Y} 422 (2003); Nunziato, \textit{supra} note 51.
\textsuperscript{265}Id. at 443.
\textsuperscript{266}Id. at 453–55.
\textsuperscript{268}Balkin, \textit{supra} note 243, at 23.
... bring[ing] to light features of freedom of speech that have always existed in the background but now become foregrounded.”269 In that respect, the technologies advance the central purpose of freedom of speech—which is “to promote democratic culture” by affording individuals “a fair opportunity to participate in the forms of meaning making that constitute them as individuals.”270

B. Synthesis

At their core, affirmative theories of freedom of expression make two arguments. First, the most important expressive value is mass participation by individuals in a self-governing democracy. Second, that value faces threats not only from state actors but also from powerful private actors (e.g., large media conglomerates) that constrain individuals’ participation in the public discourse. Although some affirmative theorists take the extra step of proposing policies whereby state actors use public law to limit the private actors’ power, this article does not take that step. Rather, this article uses affirmative theories to present a framework for understanding the threats that digital intermediaries pose to the public discourse through content governance. Connecting the concepts from Internet governance with Professor Lessig’s theory of regulation helps bring the study of content governance into the ambit of both legal scholarship and First Amendment theory.

Professor Lessig has argued that speech regulations should be analyzed through the lens of key First Amendment values.271 He proposed a model with four “modalities” of regulation: law, social norms, the marketplace, and the design of technologies facilitating the activity being regulated.272 Law regulates an activity by punishing it or by codifying incentives that encourage individuals to engage in alternative activities. Norms, often defined by a society’s moral values, regulate an activity by socially stigmatizing or encouraging it. Markets regulate an activity by making it costly.

269 Id. at 2.
270 Id. at 3.
271 Lessig, supra note 38.
272 Id. at 124.
or by incentivizing individuals to engage in alternative activities. And, finally, the design (“architecture”) of a technology facilitating an activity regulates it by enabling it to be performed only in the way permitted by the technology. Importantly, all of these modalities are interdependent. They interact with one another in the context of content governance.

First, consider law. Section 230 grants commercial intermediaries immunity from tort liability for third-party content. Not only are intermediaries immune from liability for hosting the content on their platforms, they are also immune from liability for removing it—essentially, from assuming control of it. Thus, Section 230 encourages content governance by promising that intermediaries will not be punished for it. Meanwhile, case law indicates that commercial intermediaries have a First Amendment right to manage content on their platforms.

Second, consider norms. This modality is the most important to this article. Because law grants intermediaries so much discretion to manage user content, the intermediaries must devise and enact

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273 Lessig gives the example of smoking to illustrate his four-part model. Laws can make it more difficult to smoke in public places, thereby leading people to consider quitting. Social stigmatization may lead people to quit, lest they become social pariahs. The high cost of cigarettes may make the opportunity cost of smoking too high for many people, leading them to quit. Finally, the design of a cigarette makes smoking odorous and leads to lung cancer. If one wants to smoke but does not want to smell or get lung cancer, one must choose not to smoke or to use an alternative to smoking (e.g., an e-cigarette). *Id.* at 122–23.

274 Continuing the smoking example, the high cost of cigarettes is often the result of laws that set the taxes governments collect on the product. The fact that cigarettes have a strong smell may lead to smoking being a socially stigmatized activity, which may in turn lead to laws that ban the activity in public places.


276 *See also* Miami Herald Pub. Co. v. Tornillo, 418 U.S. 241 (1974) (holding that a Florida statute requiring newspapers to publish responses from individuals who believed they were attacked in newspapers amounted to an unconstitutional prior restraint); Cyber Promotions v. AOL, 948 F. Supp. 436 (E.D. Pa. 1996) (holding that AOL’s email service did not amount to a “critical pathway” of communication, and thus the government could not regulate it); *see generally* Bruce W. Sanford & Jane E. Kirtley, *The First Amendment Tradition and Its Critics*, in THE PRESS 263 (Geneva Overholser & Kathleen Hall Jamieson eds., 2005).
their own policies to do so. Content-governance norms are constructed through a process of negotiation. 277 Sometimes, employees of digital intermediaries decide which types of content will be subject to private governance, and other times individual users define what constitutes undesirable content by pressuring intermediaries to adopt certain community values. 278

Third, consider the market. As discussed above, the networked economy’s structure incentivizes intermediaries to make their platforms a welcome place and experience for users. 279 The goal is to attract and retain as many users as possible. This modality, then, is connected to the norm modality: what sells will be what the user community deems desirable. So, if community norms dictate that certain speech does not sell (i.e., its presence deters individuals from using a platform), that speech is not likely to survive because of market pressure.

Finally, consider design. Whatever norms commercial intermediaries follow to govern content, they will be baked into the platforms’ design (which, in this context, Lessig refers to as “code”). For example, platforms may give users the ability to flag offensive content (i.e., to notify the intermediary about the content and request that some action be taken). 280 The act of removing content, or of effectively excommunicating the individual who created it, is a function of platform design.

Again, the modalities are interdependent, showing, among other things, that technological design must be conceived as a product of social norms. Technology policy “is the construction and [the] legal authorization of sociotechnical systems designed to select out those activities we want to render impossible (and the converse, those we hope to encourage).” 281 “[T]echnologies are the product of political choices and have political consequences that must be recognized and acknowledged.” 282 Political choices and

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277 See generally Langlois, supra note 62.
278 See generally Crawford & Gillespie, supra note 106.
279 van Dijck, supra note 31, at 51.
280 See generally Crawford & Gillespie, supra note 106.
281 Gillespie, supra note 41, at 10.
282 Id. at 66.
consequences imply an inherent conflict in technological design and implementation. We build technologies in both the physical and the “rhetorical sense, drawing linguistic boundaries around them to indicate what is part of the [technology] and what is not, shaping how the relationship between elements can and will be characterized.”\textsuperscript{283} In short, rhetoric and technology go hand-in-hand because technology is, itself, an argument and an interpretation of how it should be used.

\section*{V. CONCLUSION}

Recall that Professor Rosen said the task of translating democratic principles for our time and technologies falls not only to judges but also to regulators, legislators, and technologists.\textsuperscript{284} And Professor Balkin said as our “lives are increasingly dominated by information technology and information flows,” the doctrinal First Amendment, with its focus on rights against the government, will grow “increasingly irrelevant” to the future’s key free speech battles.\textsuperscript{285} Indeed, policy discussions worldwide are converging on the idea that “the private sector has a shared responsibility to help safeguard free expression,”\textsuperscript{286} and this article advances those discussions and makes a significant contribution to the related scholarly literature by synthesizing Internet governance concepts and theories with those of content management and normative theories regarding the social value and limits of freedom of expression. This article also puts in concrete terms, by evaluating the chain of digital intermediaries that make up the Internet’s basic infrastructure, the proposition that intermediaries are regularly conducting “private . . . speech regulation.”\textsuperscript{287}

Interestingly, new realist scholars once saw broadcast media as a threat to individual participation in the public discourse. Professor Barron argued, in fact, that U.S. broadcasters wielded

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{283} Id. at 75.
\textsuperscript{285} Balkin, \textit{supra} note 83, at 427.
\textsuperscript{286} Clinton, \textit{supra} note 17.
\textsuperscript{287} Benesch & MacKinnon, \textit{supra} note 10.
\end{footnotesize}
enormous power over the public discourse simply by exercising their First Amendment rights to manage their own programming.\textsuperscript{288} He said the resulting power imbalance—between broadcasters and viewers—derived from the medium’s pervasiveness, the broadcasters’ ability to reach large national audiences, and the reality that the limited number of broadcasting channels was concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations.\textsuperscript{289} Famously, Barron contended that broadcasters’ power was so great that American courts should recognize a First Amendment right of access—for individuals—to the broadcasters’ otherwise closed channels of communication, lest the public discourse grow stagnant.\textsuperscript{290}

Internet communications were seen as the antidote to that power imbalance,\textsuperscript{291} because individuals would have greater ability to communicate messages that compete with those of large media companies. More than a decade before the Web’s invention, sociologist and technologist Ithiel de Sola Pool recognized the potential of electronic communication to be an “expander[] of human culture”\textsuperscript{292} that would end the monopolistic reign of large broadcast corporations.\textsuperscript{293} Networked communication has not exactly realized that potential. The Internet, like broadcast, is a medium in which a few major players dominate traffic and crowd out alternative perspectives.\textsuperscript{294} For scholars like Pool and Barron, the issues presented by content governance are a step back to the days of corporate power over the public discourse through control of broadcast media. The main question that remains is how far backward this step is. Answering that question is a task of future research.

In the meantime, we urge intermediaries to be transparent regarding their content-governance practices. They are already

\textsuperscript{288} Barron, \textit{supra} note 257.
\textsuperscript{289} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{290} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{292} Pool, \textit{supra} note 291, at 226.
\textsuperscript{293} \textit{Id.} at 246–47.
\textsuperscript{294} Barron, \textit{supra} note 257, at 1644.
transparent in some ways—many have published their content rules and community standards, as well as reports about their interactions with government entities. However, they are not always transparent in applying their rules and standards, leaving users and others to wonder—in too many cases—how or why a particular decision was made. Intermediaries must be as open as possible to maintain the robustness of the public discourse they facilitate. Their actions merit scrutiny. After all, the phenomenon of intermediaries may not be new, but the Internet’s extensive reliance on them, combined with the public’s extensive use of the Internet, has amplified significantly the influence and importance of digital intermediaries to the public discourse.\textsuperscript{295} They are major players in the evolving story of free expression.

\textsuperscript{295} Ardia, \textit{supra} note 20, at 378.