

No Mods, No Masters

The Cyber-Libertarian Dream and the
Inevitability of Content-Moderation Bureaucracy

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In this paper we will

- Catalog some cyberlibertarian movements
- Identify the underlying intellectual currents
- Describe their hatred for content moderation as opposition to Weberian bureaucracy
- Explain why content moderation is inevitable

Two libertarian takes on content moderation

- (1) Content moderation is the *exercise* of platform operators' fundamental personal liberties
- (2) Content moderation is the *restriction* of platform users' fundamental personal liberties

Why does (2) have such enduring appeal?

Cyberlibertarianism: some examples

- Physical exit: micronations, seasteads, space colonies, etc.
- Crypto round 1: cryptography
- Data havens
- Crypto round 2: blockchains
- Free culture
- The network state

Intellectual currents

- Libertarianism
- Anarchism
- From the state to technology
- Hostility to bureaucracy

Content moderation reconsidered

- Some see content moderation as a *de facto* instrument of state power (cf. *Murthy*)
- Others see content moderation *itself* as the machinery of bureaucratic oppression
- Hence: a recurring hostility to content moderation as a *form of governance*

No governance is not an option

- Disputes arise
- Someone has to resolve disputes
- Disputes are political
- Dispute resolution is governance
- You can exit from a particular governance regime, but not from the need for governance

Max Weber's sources of authority

- Traditional/patriarchal
- Legal/rational/bureaucratic
- Personalist/charismatic

Bureaucracy emerges because it works

- lifeforms → crabs
- laws → legal system
- charisma → bureaucracy

Content moderation emerges because it works

- Platform governance decisions must *resolve users' conflicts*—someone has to decide
- Platform governance decisions must be *legitimated to users*—someone has to explain
- Platform governance decisions must be *made at scale*—a founder cannot be everywhere
- Content moderation bureaucracy is a functional solution to very real problems

The cyberlibertarian fantasy

- Content moderation is the visible face of the governance work that digital communities must perform to continue to exist
- Cyberlibertarian exit has to go somewhere, and that somewhere will need content moderation
- Those who cannot understand bureaucracy are doomed to recreate it

Questions?