Platform Governance in Canada

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The internet has created enormous social, political, and economic benefits over the past 30 years. However, these benefits have also come at considerable costs. This current phase of the internet has seen the growth and consolidation of a few global platform companies over the past 15 years. The harms attributed to platforms include election interference, harmful and hate speech, as well as mis- and disinformation. These harms are thwarting the aims of building stronger and more inclusive communities and promoting a safe environment for Canadians to experience diverse cultural expressions.

There is growing attention to these issues and increasing regulatory actions around the world. Governments have started to test strategies to govern the digital public sphere, converging on what scholars call a platform governance agenda. Nonprofits like the Internet Archive continue to work on a vision for a public interest internet. Meanwhile, scholars have begun to articulate an interdisciplinary approach to platforms' role in society, and how domestic and international governance regimes might respond. This includes disciplines such as communications, media studies, history, law, computer science, psychology, political science, public policy, journalism, and sociology.

While encouraging, the emerging discourse in academia and public policy on platform governance too often remains siloed by topic. Research and policy also remain largely disconnected. Here, we offer a set of 16 short pieces to address these two issues.

These pieces arrive at a timely moment in Canadian platform governance. Bills on content such as C-11 or C-18 have probably grabbed the most headlines. As has the government's process of consultation on a potential online safety bill. So too much scholarship has focused on content topics, female Muslim politicians and political candidates more broadly, connected citizenship in Canada, and the origins of misinformation on Twitter. Elections have provided a particular focal point as did the infodemic during Covid-19.

But there is activity on many more fronts, including the Artificial Intelligence and Data Act (AIDA), potential online safety legislation, and reforms to the Competition Act starting with C-19 passed in June 2022. As the Canadian government undertakes a platform governance agenda, we need an overarching and synthetic framework to fit all these bills and regulatory efforts together.

This collection of pieces applies to the Canadian context a framework for understanding and implementing global platform governance developed by Nanjala Nyabola, Taylor Owen, and Heidi Tworek in 2021-22. This systemic approach is vital to address the range of problems in this space and to identify the full suite of possible solutions.

Our framework suggests four interlinked domains of platform governance: content, data, competition, and infrastructure. While a knowledge base already exists in Canada on these four domains, it is lacking in some areas and is often not connected across these four areas.

Content: The highest priority problems concerning the negative impact of disinformation, violent extremism, and hate speech are content-related. Platform companies have struggled to moderate this

content, settling for deletion or down-ranking visibility in the automated curation of social media feeds. As these problems often attract the most public attention, we have included six briefs to tackle different aspects of content regulation ranging from social media influencers during elections (Elizabeth Dubois) and online harms regulation (Emily Laidlaw) to Canadians' beliefs about regulating private messaging services (Sam Andrey) and the role of chilling effects (Jon Penney). Multiple pieces address current legislative efforts such as C-11, the Online Streaming Act (Robyn Caplan), and C-18, a bill about how online platforms might compensate news organisations for content (Vivek Krishnamurthy).

Data: While content-focused policies attract the most attention, data too is high on the agenda with discussion around AIDA. Work on data has examined topics including [PIPEDA and AI governance](#), [human rights and data protection](#), [Indigenous data](#) sovereignty. At the same time as we grapple with improving AIDA (Christelle Tessono), other pieces consider new approaches to data in general, whether around definitions of public/private (Wendy Chun and Prem Sylvester) or arguing for a new concept of "human-derived data" (Teresa Scassa).

Competition: The unprecedented scale of the digital platform economy has created new questions around how to regulate markets. While the European Union, for example, passed a Digital Markets Act in July 2022, more work is needed to understand the possibilities and potential effects in Canada, particularly as the Competition Act enters into the second stage of reform in the next year. This moment offers new chances to spur innovation (Keldon Bester) or rethink the right approach to competition and platforms (Jennifer Quaid), while also remembering to scrutinize Canadian companies like Shopify (Vass Bednar). Only two peer-reviewed articles seem to exist on Shopify, for example. [One](#) was written by German researchers based in Germany and did not examine the platform from a Canadian perspective. The [second](#) by researchers in Pakistan looks at Shopify app reviews.

Infrastructure: The platform ecosystem is built on communications, computational, energy, and human infrastructure. Work on infrastructure in Canada has already considered the digital divide for [rural Indigenous communities](#), [Huawei](#) and the geopolitics of internet infrastructure, and [Sidewalk Labs' Quayside Project](#). Yet, there are many more aspects of infrastructure. ChatGPT and generative AI have shown how companies can use and potentially abuse current infrastructures and legal regimes underpinning underlying available online content (Rob Hunt and Fenwick McKelvey). Infrastructure shows how platforms are intertwined with a far broader governance space, including labour rights (Eric Tucker), geopolitics (Blayne Haggart), the Internet of Things, and the environment (Sonja Solomun).

Rather than suggesting a silver bullet from any one policy, these 16 pieces explore different aspects of platform governance to understand how these different aspects work together, how they can be advanced in unison, and to tease out recommendations specifically for Canada. This is particularly crucial as the Canadian government is currently legislating on so many aspects of the platform governance agenda. These pieces will hopefully help to ensure that any governance agenda accounts for the full range of issues around platforms and considers a systemic approach to governing platforms.