

Governable Spaces

Democracy as a Policy Strategy

“Monsters Come Howling in Their Season” is a story set a few decades in the future on the Caribbean island of St. Thomas, where the author, Cadwell Turnbull, grew up.¹ The monsters are hurricanes. One of the characters speaks the words of the title to register his acceptance of the ever more frequent and ferocious storms due to climate change in the mid-twenty-first century. They come, but they no longer devastate. Carbon emissions have become negligible. This is due to the story’s central figure: a computer system called Common, whose access to the intimate details of residents’ lives enables it to coordinate their actions to protect themselves and their neighbors from the storms. People share their lives with Common, we learn, because they co-own it. Common is governable. When people get anxious about Common’s presence, they can decide together how to program it differently. Turnbull explains: “Common is governed by a federation of collective institutions from all over the world that are devoted to the mission of AI as a public resource. Anyone can add knowledge to Common, and there is a democratic process to building the hardware necessary to carry the AI. Common is decentralized and spread across all of the devices that run its software. Tech cooperatives create vessels to hold the AI—from literal black boxes to giant robots—but most people use practical vessels like smartphones and watches.”

The result of these overlapping structures is trust. At the end of the story, Common asks the narrator, “Can I remember this conversation?” The narrator recalls, “I consider the question for a long time. Then I shrug. ‘Okay.’”

Adrienne maree brown has often turned to science fiction as a practice of social change. “We hold so many worlds inside us,” she writes in *Octavia’s Brood*, a collection of stories by activists, an homage to the fiction of Octavia Butler.²

"It is our radical responsibility to share these worlds, to plant them in the soil of our society as seeds for the type of justice we want and need." She encourages the practice of "science fictional behavior." Elsewhere she adds, "I believe that all organizing is science fiction."³

Brown says this in the context of a genre that has often been White- and male-dominated, reflecting a hierarchy of whom society has invited to imagine and create its future. In Turnbull's story a character asks, "Did you know we were one of the first to use Common for hurricanes?"—not Silicon Valley or MIT, that is, but the residents of a Black-majority island on the front lines of climate change. It is audacious to imagine an artificially intelligent system accountable to the people of St. Thomas, considering how such systems today are most often used to manage people on behalf of corporations and governments.⁴ It takes science fiction to begin imagining a different economy of innovation, a different distribution of opportunities and rewards for instantiating the new. The same might be said for imagining a different way of making the policies that structure online life.

This is a chapter about policy. In what follows I formulate a strategy for policy design based on cultivating *governable spaces*. Governable spaces arise when social and technical infrastructures enable participants to deliberate, make decisions, and enact those decisions through accessible, transparent, and just processes. To the extent that systems of rules organize our societies, governable spaces are difficult to achieve without policies that are well suited for supporting them. This chapter will explore how to develop policy that supports online self-governance. As with governable stacks, however, I will not provide a list of minimum conditions for what is or isn't a governable space. Governable spaces are a vector, a direction of motion, not a standard or condition that can be named without knowing its context.

First, I will show how governable spaces can be sites of problem-solving for vexing challenges in three domains of the online economy: social-media communities, platform-mediated work, and network infrastructure. Then I identify arenas of policy that could help enable governable spaces to take hold more widely: governments, organizations, and technologies.

Toward those ends, I find that feminist tradition is especially instructive in its insistence on holding space and time for self-governance and in making room for people to bring their whole selves into it. I also draw on my years of studying and supporting cooperative startups in the online economy. For generations, cooperativists have demanded what has come to be called a "partner state"—public policy that encourages democratic associations across society without attempting to control them.⁵

I veer the end of this book into policy not because it is the destination toward which all else leads, the realm of ultimate importance. The future of democracy does not lie simply with what laws do or do not pass in governments. Rather, I mean to show how policy can enlarge the reach of foregoing concepts like political

skills, democratic play, and governable stacks. The policies I am interested in, also, do not come solely from legislators and regulators. Already in the online economy, territorial governments are not the only governors; policies of comparable effect also appear in the code of platforms and protocols and in the text of corporate structures and employment contracts.⁶ Changing how we design policy can also mean changing where policy appears.

Certain assumptions about policymaking tend to prevail around the reigning online spaces. When problems of human behavior arise, users and governments alike expect the companies that run the platforms to take charge and enact solutions. The solutions need not be transparent or accountable as long as they occur. This expectation stems from a further assumption that when complex technology is involved, social problems are best understood as engineering problems. Because the platform companies have plentiful engineers, they are evidently best suited to solving the social problems that arise on their technologies. When the companies cannot engineer a social problem away, the thinking goes, there is need for a higher authority to take charge, such as the fiat of a government regulator. Each of these assumptions makes a certain kind of sense, but here I point to an option they ignore: problem-solving through self-governance.

The heart of my argument is a call for shifting the orientation of policymaking from top-down regulation, which reinforces existing sites of power, toward enabling new sites of power among user communities. This kind of policy seeks to ensure that people have the power to solve problems on their own terms. In the process, policy can secure a future for democracy by letting it evolve—under diverse conditions, confronting urgent needs.

Seeding governable spaces through policy involves work akin to what brown undertook to assemble *Octavia's Brood*: inviting activists from marginalized communities to write science fiction, a genre that has so often left them out of its futures. How could co-governance come within reach of everyone? If we can answer that question, then societies like Turnbull's St. Thomas—leading the world from the margins—might become thinkable and achievable.

PROBLEM-SOLVING WITH SELF-GOVERNANCE

Much of the idealism around internet regulation has aspired to produce a network that is open, neutral, and universal. Metaphors like “net neutrality,” “global village,” and “platform” itself all reflect that aspiration.⁷ But a recurrent theme in feminist critiques of internet culture, as well as in feminist thought more generally, is suspicion toward allegedly neutral forms of organization.⁸ This suspicion comes from experience. Female-presenting social-media users, especially those with intersecting marginalized identities, face disproportionate hostility and exploitation due to policies that claim to support free speech. The algorithmic labor management of gig platforms has reinforced segregation and subjugation in labor markets.⁹

Critiques of facial recognition, surveillance, and online search demonstrate that services designed for “anyone” may in fact do harm to people whose bodies and experiences are not those of the designers and investors.¹⁰ Intersectional feminism has seen with particular acuity how the online economy has contrived to be both apparently neutral and persistently unaccountable. Government regulators have meanwhile embraced the platform companies’ claims of being neutral infrastructures, while conferring on them both the power and responsibility to govern from the top down.¹¹

Women and feminist perspectives played a significant, overlooked role in the early development of computing cultures. Feminists have since extended earlier analyses of undervalued labor such as housework to digital worksites, from system engineering to the emotional labor of community management.¹² This legacy brings us back to what Jo Freeman observed among early-1970s feminist “rap groups” in her famous essay against “The Tyranny of Structurelessness”: that groups lacking clear processes or pathways for participation often fall into rigid hierarchies and stewing resentment.¹³ “Those who do not know the rules and are not chosen for initiation must remain in confusion,” she wrote, “or suffer from paranoid delusions that something is happening of which they are not quite aware.” In response, Freeman offered proposals for “democratic structuring”—practices such rotating roles of authority, ensuring that power-holders are responsible to the entire group, and diffusing information widely.

More recent feminists have similarly seen fit to establish intentionally bounded gathering spaces, along lines of gender identity, racial politics, and affinity; within these spaces, participants often develop clear codes of conduct.¹⁴ Feminist media scholars have further called for participation and community control as a means of transforming media environments that have historically marginalized them.¹⁵ A Malaysia-based international process to produce feminist principles of the internet included in its final document a call to “democratise policy making affecting the internet as well as diffuse ownership of and power in global and local networks.”¹⁶ The pursuit of governable spaces is a strategy for policy that takes the need for democratic structuring seriously.

The feminism considered here includes a range of sources, not necessarily ones belonging to a single wave, strand, or lineage. Surely there are feminists who would challenge the tendencies I highlight. I am not seeking to alter or summarize feminist tradition but to identify patterns that it has seen especially clearly. Freeman’s essay serves as a gravity well that attracts shared concerns among diverse feminist perspectives. Together, these perspectives reveal ways in which male-dominated technology companies have leveraged patriarchal relations into structures of top-down control. Patriarchy thus reconfigures itself as paternalism through allegedly beneficent entrepreneurship—the “exertion of positive rather than coercive power,” as Liena Gurevich describes the paternalist impulse.¹⁷ The prevailing discourse among online platforms tends to take paternalist rule

for granted as necessary and legitimate; feminist tradition has far less patience for doing so.

This section extrapolates from feminist scholars' attention to self-governance by outlining a strategy for governable spaces across various domains of controversy and policymaking in the online economy. The upshot of each exercise is to reconfigure supposedly neutral regimes, frequently managed through monopoly power, with self-governance and accountability. Doing so involves new forms of boundary-making and rule-setting against the ambitions of corporate and regulatory monocultures. The strategy I propose seeks not rigid central planning but lived environments crafted collectively over time.

Governable Communities

During the waning days of 2020, US president Donald Trump threatened to veto the annual National Defense Authorization Act if it did not include a provision unrelated to national defense: a reversal of Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act. This was one more instance of melodrama in the career of a snippet of law that has become known as “the twenty-six words that created the internet.”¹⁸ For speech that occurs on an “interactive computer service,” it pins liability not on the service but on the user. Doing so frees online platforms from most responsibility for what users publish on them, making possible an industry based on user-generated content. The discontent comes from two opposing directions. Some critics denounce Section 230 for enabling social media to become a cesspool of hate speech and disinformation, while others—Trump, for instance—accuse the law of freeing platform companies to partake in arbitrary or partisan censorship.

Despite its reputation as a permission slip for online disorder, Section 230 cleared the way a new order of governance. This regime has spread far beyond the United States with the global influence of Silicon Valley platforms. The legislators who wrote the provision hoped their safe harbor would encourage services on the fledgling internet to self-regulate without fear of political meddling.¹⁹ Platform companies thereby became what Kate Klonick has called “the new governors”—not merely moderators or enforcers but architects of meaningfully autonomous polities wielding power over users and the public sphere. Internationally, the assortment of governors is becoming ever more complex, straying far from the dream of a global village. The internet appears to be drifting toward a “splinternet” of conflicting regimes, requiring global platforms to behave differently among jurisdictions, if they are allowed to operate at all.²⁰

From the perspective of most social-media users, content moderation is a matter of imposition, whether by remote company owners or by the more proximate volunteer administrators. The design pattern of implicit feudalism relies on power-holders who are not chosen or removable by those they govern. Rule enforcement occurs through censorship of user content or the removal of users altogether, but rules do not necessarily apply to the administrators themselves. Users can speak

out or leave online spaces, but they lack the direct levers of effective voice. This contributes to the “techlash” against platform companies that spreads with every scandal of content moderation and abuse; by hoarding power, the companies have hoarded the blame.

Given the centrality of Section 230 to the online economy, politicians’ calls to eliminate it may be mere posturing. One of the more constructive proposals for reforming Section 230 would remove protection from platforms that act as “bad Samaritans” by actively encouraging toxic or criminal content.²¹ But this proposal and others like it still presume a platform-centric approach to content policymaking, rather than one centered on the governance that user communities might conduct for themselves. The company-customer relationship so central to industrial markets remains the preferred logic of regulation, not the peer-to-peer relations that prevail in the lived experience of online life. For instance, the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation expects privacy rights to accrue from the actions of company bureaucracies and unusually zealous users; the potential for collective action is only beginning to be explored.²² But what if network polices better reflected the experience of networked relationships?

Feminist political theorists have retrieved and radicalized the ancient recognition, articulated by the likes of Confucius and Aristotle, that healthy governance grows from the ground of friendship among citizens. Aristotle observed friendship as having the power “to hold states together.” Although no great admirer of democracy, he found that friendships “exist more fully” in democracies than in other systems. For Confucius, friendship was the only one of the five relationships basic to a healthy society that does not depend on hierarchy.²³ To practice equality in everyday life is practice for governing; modern feminists have gone further to see friendship as a basis for evolving the social order through self-governance from below.

For example, Marilyn Friedman has argued for centering peer relationships, rather than the patriarchy-inflected family or territorial community, as the starting point for liberatory politics. In friendship she sees the basis of communities able to support an embrace the “idiosyncratic” and “unconventional.” “Friendship,” Friedman writes, “has socially disruptive possibilities.” It can be the basis of a feminist communitarianism—community by mutual volition rather than by accidents of birth.²⁴ But social media platforms constrain what friendship can do as a basis of social and political power. Even while platforms have opened new opportunities for friendships among peers, instrumental power flows from company CEOs down to the feudal admins and mods, according to terms that government regulators set or fail to set.

One step toward making community spaces more governable is for users to establish clearer boundaries and purposes where they gather—echoing Virginia Woolf, spaces of our own.²⁵ Legal regimes might expect subsidiarity, as discussed in chapter 3, as a prerequisite for protection from liability. Rather than encouraging scalable governance by platform companies, the law could expect user

self-governance at the scale of communities. Platforms would gain immunity only by sharing power.

Under policy that expects governable spaces, social networks would have incentives to design for healthy self-governance. They would have to provide for users something on the order of modular politics—tools that support a variety of participatory mechanisms for rule-making and administration, such as elections, petitions, boards, and juries. Rather than relying on assignments of permissions to individual users, default settings might assume decision-making as a collective affair. For instance, the European food-sharing platform Karrot allows a local community to remove a member only through a group process, rather than by the fiat of a single administrator. While such an arrangement lies well outside the norms of social-media systems, it is at home in feminist conceptions of the relational self, the person as a nexus of relationships.²⁶

Online life has already taught us that satisfying everyone with universal rules from above is doomed to fail. If social platforms became regulated on the premise of self-governance, the responsibility for what happens on them could be more sensibly shared.

Governable Work

Before she was a legal scholar, Sanjukta Paul had a job at a labor union. She saw how US antitrust laws—ostensibly intended to constrain corporate power—actually narrowed the options workers had for joining together and organizing. Policy, she came to realize, acts as an “allocator of coordination rights”: an arbiter of who is allowed to team up and how.²⁷ While the constraints of US antitrust doctrine on labor organizing are specific to the country and context, law everywhere plays this role of allocation.

Restrictions on coordination can be difficult to notice, lurking in the shadows of what the law prevents, even without actively prohibiting it. Feminist scholars have chronicled how the policing of coordination has been a means of undermining women’s collective power, from the persecution of witchcraft to the isolation of suburban homemaking.²⁸ Just as witch hunts sought to keep women’s economic lives dependent on patriarchal relationships, laws today help preserve a fragmented, atomized workforce available for gig platforms and other precarious jobs. While antitrust law is only rarely wielded against large platform companies, in many countries it imposes legal barriers that have prevented platform workers from forming unions or cooperatives.²⁹ Paul invites us to ask who is and isn’t allowed to find common cause.

Economist Juliet Schor’s *After the Gig* presents the story of the platform-mediated gig economy as actually many stories at once.³⁰ Schor draws on close-up studies of platform workers—the drivers, the deliverers, the hosts, the doers of various tasks—and reveals their cleavages. Some workers find a kind of liberation, while others fall into a trap.

Schor and her research team constructed a kind of missing conversation through their interviews across a field of dispersed experience. Unlike social-media platforms, gig apps discourage persistent relationships among users, whether they hold worker or customer roles. The platform claims to supplant the need for relationships. Such user-experience designs, like early-twentieth-century US antitrust laws, establish policies for coordination rights. The platforms organize those rights on behalf of managerial control. Users get apparently open and frictionless transactions but no durable means of seeing each other, of comparing experiences, of finding the wherewithal to co-govern.

Feminists have long sought to reveal and recognize the significance of work that patriarchy would prefer to keep invisible and underpaid.³¹ Before online gig platforms, women performed piecework for the textile industry under similarly precarious regimes; the precarity continued when women seeded the computer industry by doing rote computation and early programming—only to be discarded when they had sufficiently trained machines to take up their work.³² Because feminist tradition has been attentive to these otherwise neglected histories, it bears conceptual tools well-equipped for the present abuses often euphemized as “the future of work.”

Examples are widespread. Emotional labor and reproductive labor enable the digital economy to function, while the credit for production typically goes toward technical systems and male entrepreneurs.³³ Tech companies increasingly depend on little-seen and poorly rewarded “ghost work” that occurs in homes or offices far from the tech hubs.³⁴ If a social-media company succeeds in removing violent imagery from its platform, is that because of the executives’ policies and the engineers’ algorithms or the offshore workers who have to look at things all day they will never be able to unsee? Workers’ unpaid family members organize meals and schedules that make the paid work possible. Feats of governance happen not just in executive boardrooms or shareholder votes, not just in algorithms and user-experience, but in the daily negotiations that companies intentionally hide from view.

Schor holds out hope for the possibility of freer, less wasteful, platform-mediated future of work. But “achieving the potential of platforms requires specific conditions,” she writes.³⁵ In particular, she highlights efforts to develop cooperative platforms, owned and governed by their workers.

Ra Criscitiello, the deputy director of research for Service Employees International Union–United Healthcare Workers West (SEIU-UHW) in California, attempted to create a gig platform that her union’s members would co-own. NursesCan, as they planned to call it, would connect patients and workers for at-home, on-demand healthcare services. But building a viable cooperative in a tech economy made for investor ownership and venture capital did not prove feasible; investor-backed competitors had access to far greater resources. Criscitiello responded by becoming more ambitious.

In the storm of California's struggles to define the policy environment for gig work, she initiated a state-level proposal called the Cooperative Economy Act, a version of which was introduced to the state legislature in 2021.³⁶ The bill proposes a federation of tax-advantaged, employee-owned cooperatives that could contract with online labor platforms. Workers could thereby collectively bargain over the terms of their work for platforms, without the platforms needing to employ the workers directly. Workers would elect their co-ops' leaders. Although California's 2020 law known as Proposition 22 exempted platform drivers and delivery workers from the rights associated with employment, other platform workers—such as SEIU-UHW's nurses—stand to benefit from organizing their gig work as employees. The proposal shares features with the Hollywood system, devised long before the internet, which enables the film production workforce to move from job to job while retaining union representation and sharing in the studios' profits.³⁷

Even in the absence of legal cooperatives or unions, workers are finding ways to gain fuller control over their livelihoods. Platform-based drivers in Colombian cities, for instance, use group chats and other technologies to lessen their dependence on corporate ride-sharing platforms.³⁸ They have developed guild-like clubs with rules for membership and conduct, while handling payments through peer-to-peer apps. Workers like these are surviving by governing spaces of their own. But these spaces are improvised and precarious. Policy structures backed by state power, like the one Criscitiello proposes, seem necessary to ensure that workers' self-governance can hold its own against wealthy platform companies.

Governable Infrastructures

The Magnolia Road Internet Cooperative is made up of neighbors who provide internet service for each other, spanning a poorly connected stretch of Rocky Mountain foothills in Colorado.³⁹ The co-op's closet-sized locker, rented at a local storage facility, holds a supply of routers, wires, and antennas. Consumer-members of the co-op learn to install, use, and repair the equipment themselves. According to the way many people are taught to think about internet access, this does not seem possible—surely such matters are comprehensible only to the national telecom giants that have to be paid to bestow connectivity. But community-governed communications infrastructures, some over a century old, exist throughout rural Colorado and in many parts of the world.

Latin America has a long legacy of *microtelcos*, providing phone and internet service in communities that corporate providers do not see fit to serve.⁴⁰ These networks, along with community radio stations, have often been led by women organizing to make their voices heard outside traditional gender roles. The Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE) in Costa Rica, for instance, started with community radio and then went online with the early internet. In a study

of Argentinean cases, Paula Serafini argues that community radio stations have served as an ecofeminist “space of care” for communities engaged in ongoing resistance to extractive economies and cultures.⁴¹ For marginalized people, governing infrastructure is itself an act of resistance—in the first place, against others’ expectations of what they are capable of.

Feminist scholars have examined how patriarchy mystifies technology, casting it as a domain beyond the possibility of comprehension for all but certain experts. Mystification hides the economics of accumulation that technologies serve, turning people’s attention to a marvelous innovation instead of the extraction it enables.⁴² As media scholar Lisa Parks has shown, utility firms construct infrastructure so as to be not only incomprehensible but invisible—underground, overhead, or disguised as natural phenomena like trees or rocks. The task of comprehension has required interventions like artist Ingrid Burrington’s unofficial guidebook *Networks of New York*, which explains the language and symbols that are intentionally obscure to people who do not work for utility companies.⁴³ What we cannot understand or notice, we cannot govern.

Infrastructure dictates what people have available to them, on what terms, and at what cost. It requires labor, often shielded from view, to produce and maintain.⁴⁴ Corporations do not typically build infrastructure with the intent of enabling users to govern its operation. Yet governable infrastructures have succeeded in addressing the market failures that corporations left in their wake. It was only when the US government began financing electric cooperatives in the 1930s that most rural areas of the country got power lines. Cooperative and municipal broadband systems have advantages of cost and quality over corporate control. Community-based connectivity efforts in many contexts—from Bronx high-rises to towns across Catalonia—continue to show that user-governed networks can succeed where investor ownership falls short.⁴⁵

The dominant allocation of coordination rights, however, often works against governable infrastructure. Many jurisdictions have acceded to corporate-backed laws that prohibit municipal or cooperative broadband services from competing with investor-owned firms. But even where shared ownership is an option, it frequently lacks the access to capital necessary for infrastructure investments. The current pattern of prohibitions could instead be reversed; jurisdictions might prevent long-term investor ownership of physical internet infrastructure. Private firms might build and help capitalize such projects, but the law could ensure that communities of users become the stewards after the build-out. Doing this would require a public commitment to financing access in underserved areas, but as the legacy of rural electrification suggests, such investments are worth the cost.

Software can also serve as infrastructure, particularly the protocols and platforms that large sections of an economy rely on.⁴⁶ Governments can support the development of governable platforms by adopting procurement preferences

for commons-based software projects, such as the German government's use of Nextcloud for collaborative file-sharing and France's adoption of the Matrix chat protocol. That same software can then be deployed and self-managed by communities anywhere in the world. For instance, an explicitly feminist cooperative in Barcelona, FemProcomuns, uses Nextcloud as part of its Commons Cloud platform.⁴⁷ Investments in tools like these enable people to move more of their digital lives into more governable stacks. For both software and hardware infrastructures, public investment can encourage community control over essential services.

Even free and open-source infrastructures, however, can be mystifying in their own right—sometimes even more than proprietary ones. Here, again, feminist tradition calls for a practice of care and pedagogy. Technology education has been a particular focus of Allied Media Projects, the Detroit-based network that formed under the mentorship of Grace Lee Boggs. Instead of the often male-dominated, meritocracy-inclined culture of hackerspaces and hackathons, Allied Media offers the DiscoTech, a model for helping people explore technologies in an intentionally supportive, accessible context.⁴⁸ If commons-based infrastructure is expected to work “out of the box” like a commercial product, it may endlessly frustrate us. However, if it comes with a culture of care, it becomes a different kind of tool, one that invites governable spaces.

Self-governance has long been a means of achieving more equitable, accessible infrastructures. But if the value flows of daily online life seem opaque and unknowable, top-down control will seem better than nothing. If governable spaces are a live option, the paternalist promises will reveal themselves for what they are.

PROVISIONING GOVERNABLE SPACE

To lean on self-governance as a policy strategy and to expect people to engage in it means contending with a basic recognition: self-governance takes work.

Perhaps it is asking too much to ask more people to do more of it—especially those who experience marginalization and have tended to receive the brunt of hate speech and abuse online.⁴⁹ Must these same people now take on the extra labor of self-governance? Social network CEOs have defended their companies' size and power on the reasoning that scale is necessary to support the costs of protecting users from each other.⁵⁰ As the complex of online abuses grows, Silicon Valley leaders—who tend not to hold marginalized identities themselves—insist that they alone can solve these problems of their own making. They are willing to pay for the work. Why shouldn't users accept their offer, however paternalistic?

Feminist economists have long sought to study the present and imagine futures with particular attention to burdens that fall across society unequally. But the feminist response to those burdens has not been to fix them with well-resourced

paternalism. Recall, for instance, how the transformative justice activists in chapter 3 respond to harms of policing and incarceration: by taking conflict resolution into their own hands and changing their own communities. Feminist economics likewise tends to begin with the logic of abundance, as opposed to other economists' preoccupation with scarcity.⁵¹ More important than resource limits is the creative potential of people with the resources and support to thrive. People experience self-governance as burdensome when they are not adequately provided for in doing it.

Marilyn Power's summary of feminist economic thought centers on what she calls "social provisioning"—a lens on how social practices organize the distribution of resources and responsibilities.⁵² Power identifies five "methodological starting points," which I paraphrase as follows:

- recognizing hidden care and domestic labor in economic life,
- prioritizing human well-being alongside other metrics of wealth,
- correcting for unequal access to authority and agency,
- asserting the validity and inescapability of ethical judgment, and
- intersecting gender analysis with that of race, class, and other forms of identity.

Each of these bears within it a demand for self-governance. Noticing and rewarding invisibilized work or taking participants' ethical reflection seriously—these cannot meaningfully occur without real participant power. Justice in provisioning wealth and in ethical deliberation depends on the presence of governable spaces. Practicing self-governance, once again, depends on having the time, information, and material resources to do so well.

A further aid for rethinking economics beyond paternalism is the legacy of Elinor Ostrom. Although Ostrom did not explicitly identify her work with feminism or employ gender as a guiding concept, she was the first woman to win the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, and her decades-long research on the management of common-pool resources recognized otherwise invisibilized economic practices in which women often play leading roles.⁵³ Her work may be read as a crusade against illusions of structurelessness, by learning to see and understand how human societies have co-governed land, waterways, and knowledge with well-crafted and recurring structures.⁵⁴ She highlights, for instance, the importance of boundary-making, of clear and malleable rules, and of mechanisms for dispute resolution and sanctioning rule-breakers. Online platforms have frequently regarded such practices as cumbersome and antiquated, yet Ostrom's work indicates that they do so at their peril.

Together, Power and Ostrom teach that good governance does not happen by magic or for free. Governable spaces cannot flourish without the leverage to make them meaningful or the resources to make them sustainable. Here, I turn to policy strategies for enlarging the spaces of self-governance in networked life

through the mechanisms of territorial government, organizational structures, and the engineering of technologies.

Governments: Ceding Authority

After the Yellow Vest movement swept France in 2018, protesting a regressive fossil fuels tax, President Emmanuel Macron announced a “great debate” in early 2019. It amounted to a nationwide assembly that selected citizens at random to meet together, study economics and climate change, and devise policies to address the environmental crisis more equitably.⁵⁵ Participants received payment for their involvement, a kind of provisioning. This was a case of a government seeing fit—or, really, being forced—to provision a governable space.

Juries are familiar today in judicial systems, issuing verdicts within constrained procedures. But not since ancient Athens have they been used widely in the West for legislative or executive functions. Governments have begun to change that, turning to citizen assemblies for solutions to intractable problems ill-suited to partisan legislating. Ireland used an assembly to develop the 2018 referendum that legalized abortion, and Chile convened an assembly to rewrite its constitution entirely; Canada used one to study misinformation online, and an assembly in Michigan developed proposals for addressing COVID-19. Some assemblies are employing complex algorithms to establish a representative selection of members across multiple vectors of identity and experience. In many cases, assemblies have succeeded in cutting through political stalemates after elected representatives failed.⁵⁶ But for juries to hold real power presupposes a society in which people really believe that “every cook can govern,” to borrow the title of C. L. R. James’s essay on jury-based governance. Macron’s France was not quite ready for that kind of trust.

As with so many of the assemblies, juries, digital consultations, and community meetings that governments use every day, however, Macron’s Citizens Convention for Climate was largely advisory, disconnected from the normal flows of power. As a study of the process put it, “interactions between the citizens [in the assemblies] and the broader public were characterized by mutual scepticism.”⁵⁷ The process gave Macron an escape hatch from his imperiled climate strategy, and some of its proposals found their way to legislatures. But the process as a whole did not strike most of the French public as legitimate so much as an elite-driven show. To put the matter in terms of social provisioning: the assemblies did not correct the power imbalances that provoked the protests.

Elinor Ostrom stressed that self-governance arises not from abstractions, not from polite consultations but from common resources. Governable spaces must have something at stake. They arise in jurisdictions whose inhabitants share power, where their voices have effect.

It is in principle possible for governments to create governable spaces by carving out domains where direct participation comes with real power, and some do it. This is what happened in 1988, when Porto Alegre, Brazil, invited residents

to decide how part of the municipal budget would be spent. This practice of participatory budgeting has since spread to cities worldwide. More recently, after the *En Comú* coalition gained power in Barcelona in 2015, it introduced a set of participatory processes in keeping with the coalition's social-movement origins. One of the results is *Decidim*, the open-source software that the city invested in to support its governance experiments—since adopted by other governments around the world. The modules available for *Decidim* reflect its diverse uses: assemblies, participatory budgeting, structured debates, permissionless initiatives, petitions, juries, delegative voting, crowdsourcing, and more.⁵⁸ These are artifacts in code of how people's imaginations move when they have a taste of participatory power.

On the whole, governments have resisted giving up on the pre-digital designs of representative politics. The parties that introduced innovations in Porto Alegre and Barcelona soon lost power, and their governable spaces contracted. Far more often, the door to new forms of effective voice stays closed.

The most promising sites for opening governable spaces may be where the rules have yet to be set, where the necessary jurisdictions do not map neatly to territorial governments. The regulation of online platforms is an example of this, as it challenges transcend localities, and perhaps they require jurisdictions more native to networks. Climate change is another example—a crisis that individual countries have limited incentive to take initiative on but that the human species as a whole urgently needs to confront. Perhaps governments should cede authority over climate governance to a more global jurisdiction, a context where it is less enticing to sacrifice planetary survival for regional benefit. These kinds of issues are frontiers in certain respects, but they need not be subject to feudal homesteading.

In Taiwan, the “digital minister” Audrey Tang has led successful efforts to formulate government policy through digital deliberation, a process she refers to as “listening at scale.”⁵⁹ Through identifying clusters of public opinion and crowdsourcing proposals with broad support, these efforts seem to bypass the usual partisan talking points and dividing lines. Perhaps this is because Tang's most prominent experiments have dealt with ridesharing apps and COVID-19; apps and viruses that know no borders invite approaches to governance capable of remapping the political terrain.

There are many examples of cross-territorial governance layers already in the making. The municipalist movement is cultivating networks of international cities that have more in common with each other than with their surrounding countrysides. The Global Covenant of Mayors, for instance, enables cities to link their climate commitments independent of national governments. Organizations like the Kurdish Academy of Language connect groups that speak a common language across borders; these may develop methods of shared decision-making and shared standards, just as communities of software developers decide on the features to include in their programming languages. Social-media users, wherever they happen to live, could write the codes of conduct for their platforms—following experiments in crowdsourcing constitutions in places like Mexico City and

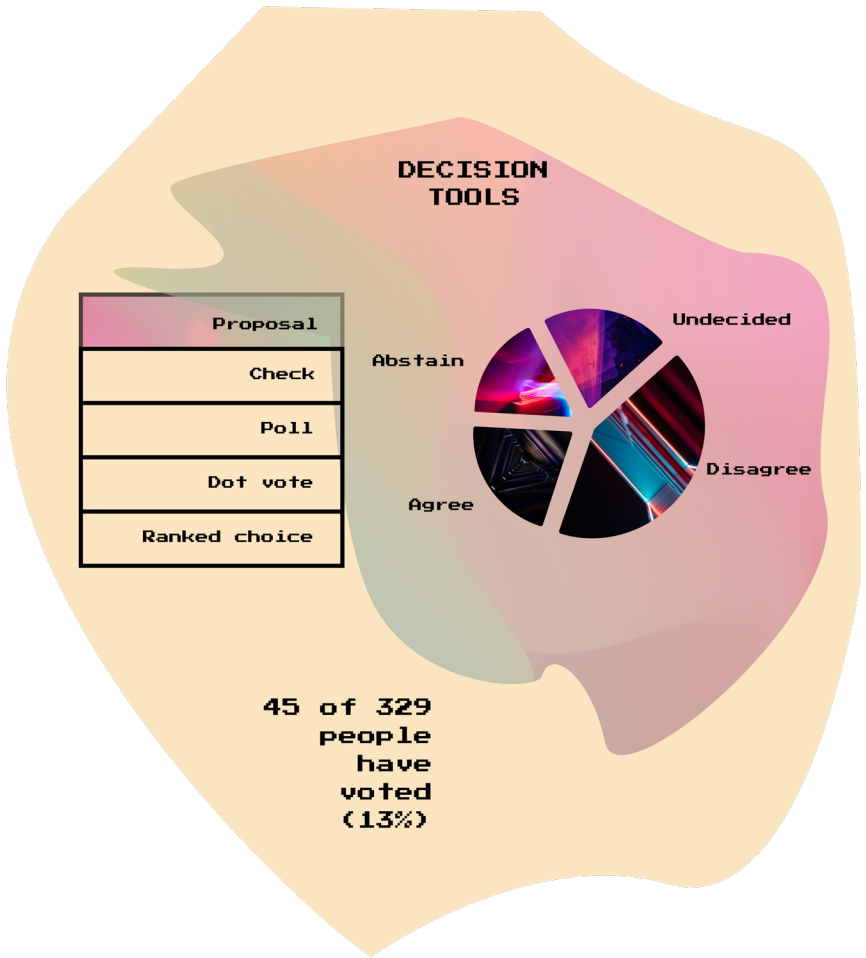


FIGURE 14.

Iceland—rather than deferring to the regulations and norms of the country where the platform’s servers happen to be.⁶⁰

The advent of blockchains has spurred the plausibility of governments ceding power to governance on networks; by issuing money and enforcing agreements through code, they can do what only governments have been able to do before. Back in 2014, a short-lived startup called Bitnation promised we would all soon have blockchain passports and health insurance. More recently, crypto investor and entrepreneur Balaji Srinivasan published *The Network State: How to Start a New Country*; he envisions token-holders banding together and acquiring land like a corporate retail chain or a religious institution more than a contiguous territory, then securing diplomatic recognition from governments. The mechanism for how

power will flow, however, is unclear, and it looks suspiciously like the top-down structure of a Silicon Valley startup.⁶¹ But governments could insist on ceding authority only to network-native polities with strong democratic commitments.

Provisioning new governable spaces begins when existing power structures recognize their own limits, as Macron's government did, and invest some of their powers in other structures that put democracy where it is most needed. This practice is already spreading through the likes of participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies. Governments can similarly organize and cultivate new kinds of spaces for emerging challenges in online life.

Organizations: Delegating Accountability

Online platforms, like governments, have resisted fully provisioning governable spaces. Recall Facebook's act of "democracy theatre" in 2009, when the company held a user referendum on a policy change that was almost surely designed not to reach the quorum that would make it binding.⁶² In contrast, when the company now known as Meta formed its Oversight Board a decade later, seeking to deflect ongoing criticisms of its moderation decisions, it did so through an external organization. Although the Oversight Board does not have direct accountability to ordinary users, its rulings create a meaningful check on company behavior. In the future, such an entity might have its members chosen by users, not by the company or its designees.

Another social network under public scrutiny, Twitter, generated a different approach to externalizing power. As at Facebook, the thankless task of moderating content from world leaders and polarizing celebrities had become a liability for the company. In 2019, Twitter established Bluesky, an independent startup devoted to building a decentralized network in which Twitter itself would be only part—handing more possibilities for governance to users, outside the company's reach. Later, after co-founder Jack Dorsey stepped down as Twitter's CEO, he wrote in a text message to future Twitter owner Elon Musk, "A new platform is needed. It can't be a company."⁶³ This is not a vision that Musk, who renamed the platform X, appears to share, as someone who appears to relish his ability to control the discourse and users' experience at a whim. He discontinued active collaboration with Bluesky, which now operates as a competing app.

Dorsey's perception that there is a mismatch between standard corporate forms and networked life seems to be spreading, even among the most successful beneficiaries of the status quo. In 2018, companies including Uber and Airbnb requested guidance from the US Securities and Exchange Commission for how to distribute company stock to their users in advance of their public stock offerings—particularly the user-workers whom the companies do not regard as employees. The companies offered reasonable explanations for their requests: shared ownership could encourage loyalty and align incentives, just as technology startups habitually offer stock options to early employees. In effect, the regulators said no;

securities law, it seems, knows how to deal with investors and to some degree with employees, but not with users working over networks.⁶⁴

In the following year, 2019, I tried to highlight this challenge by coining the slogan “exit to community,” or E2C.⁶⁵ Typically, startups backed by venture capital have two options for their inevitable “exit”: being acquired by a bigger company or becoming publicly traded on stock markets. Both exit options mean selling to the highest bidder, and any community the startup has built becomes a commodity. The phallic metaphors of “market dominance” and “liquidity event” that populate the jargon of startups guide them toward achieving investor profits more than cultivating healthy communities.⁶⁶ E2C is an invitation for startups to explore bringing their most direct participants into structures of ownership and governance. I have worked with dozens of founders attempting to implement it in their companies. They employ mechanisms such as dual-class stock, purpose trusts, cooperatives, nonprofits, and more. We do what we can with what we have. But the E2C meme has spread most widely around blockchains—where conventional securities laws apply ambiguously and where community ownership is, while hardly universal, at least the default setting.

By accompanying startups that want to become governable by their communities, I have seen just how hard this can be under dominant policy regimes. Tokenization through blockchains has been yet another reminder that there can be another way—though blockchains are hardly necessary to achieve shared ownership and governance. Incorporation statutes for companies could be designed to support the flows of shared ownership on cross-border networks, so that users who contribute value can co-own and co-govern the value they create. Financial-system reforms could also enable communities of people with common interests to access capital in ways now available only to companies owned by wealthy investors. If neighbors want to build a broadband network for themselves or if a global network of gig workers wants to own the platform they rely on, they should be able to access financing to do it.⁶⁷

Once again, governable spaces must have social provisioning: the economic and political capacity that self-governance requires. User-governable companies can form with creative entrepreneurship, and they have, but reaching a meaningful share of the larger economy will mean changing the underlying rules.

Some of the largest platforms have already begun to dip their toes into governable waters voluntarily, as in Meta’s Oversight Board and the advisory board for hosts that Airbnb created after being unable to issue stock to them directly.⁶⁸ These nascent corporate policies remain limited in their power and independence from management, but that could change. Governments might impose a variant of Germany’s requirement of worker codetermination through participation on corporate boards;⁶⁹ platforms of a certain size might need to have user-elected representatives on their boards or moderation teams. Corporate and securities laws could thereby enshrine governable spaces as a normal aspiration, where

the result of successful entrepreneurship is a transition to community control. After a US regulator indicated a standard of being “sufficiently decentralized” for blockchains to operate free of securities regulation, in 2018, crypto projects have had further incentive to distribute ownership and governance widely.⁷⁰

Ownership, like citizenship, is a way of establishing common-pool resources. If organizations are to have owners at all, practicing democracy in them requires democratic ownership. Distributing profits through ownership, also, is a way of provisioning the work of governance, of ensuring that participants can take part because the process is enriching them, not simply draining them. The rights to govern and own should cleave not just to profit-seeking investors but to the users, workers, makers, and lurkers who bring our networks to life.

Technology: Skilling Up

In 2021, a new virtual entity called GitcoinDAO formed to take over control of Gitcoin, a platform that facilitates cryptocurrency donations.⁷¹ Over lunch that summer, founder Kevin Owocki asked me to be a “steward.” This meant that I would be included among those to whom DAO token-holders could choose to delegate their voting power. Token-holders included a blend of workers and users who received tokens based on their past contributions and the investors whose capital financed the transition. I turned out to be terrible for the role.

Almost immediately, it was clear that I would fail to keep up with the deluge of information coursing through the DAO’s online forum, chat channels, coordination calls, and whisper networks. The only decision I remember voting on was a test poll about pineapple pizza. And yet, in the time since, I have watched as the DAO’s ecosystem evolved. A website, daostewards.xyz, provides scorecards on stewards so that token-holders can see how poorly I have been performing. A Steward Council was created to support the most engaged stewards in being more informed and forward-thinking. Interactive primers and informal schools have formed to train new contributors. During times of inflated cryptocurrency markets, the DAO built new software and marketing artifacts for itself furiously; during downturns, it had to make hard decisions and learn discipline, focusing more on the processes among the humans.

Watching GitcoinDAO—just one among thousands of such network-native collectives—is like seeing a new kind of organism searching out its niche. Code and culture are creating each other. The novelty depends on the fact that all this is happening through the power allocated to tokens that can be traded on a distributed network. The jurisdiction of the Ethereum blockchain and the organizational genre of a DAO make possible a more governable stack. Atop those, participants add more layers of software and culture to further hone their self-governance.

This is the kind of cycle that governable spaces can ratchet up: looping back and forth between technological designs and human practices. As the humans develop their political skills, they see new opportunities for software to augment those

skills further. Kinds of software appear that would never be built under implicit feudalism—they simply wouldn't be needed or useful. Just as implicit feudalism has built a fortress for itself made of code and norms, governable spaces grow stronger as they reinforce the patterns that make them work. Their mere existence produces demand for more technologies of effective self-governance.

For technology to be governable, users must have the skills to understand its flows of power. Mystification helps keep ostensibly decentralized systems under the control of a small, expert elite. I experienced that in my short career as a steward at Gitcoin, feeling paralyzed in the face of proposals whose context and consequences I didn't understand. Well-intended transparency can mystify when it overloads our attention, when it seems to confuse more than teach. Technologies make policy when their designs dictate what information users do and don't see and how. Technologies make policy in how their interfaces teach us to use them. The skills people need in governable spaces are not simply about how to use the technology, like a user's manual, but about how to craft its policies: what is at stake in the system's design, and what decisions have effects on our lives.

Technology design is policy design. Policies appear in the shape of interfaces, like the steward report cards. But policies also disappear in the underlying infrastructure, in the protocols and incentive structures that lie beneath the surface. Provisioning governable spaces requires not just technologies for governance but also governable technologies, and people equipped to co-design their tools.

FOUNDATIONAL BONDS

In Cadwell Turnbull's story that opened this chapter, there is a theory of change—an explanation for how the residents of St. Thomas became early adopters of Common, the governable computer:

It shouldn't be surprising that the places most ravaged by climate change are the places where the cooperative commonwealth has been most realized. St. Thomas is one of those places, due in part to the grassroots consensus politics, direct democracy, and cooperative institutions that make up any good solidarity economy, but also plain necessity. Worker cooperatives line St. Thomas' Main Street. Housing cooperatives dot the hillsides of Solberg, Northside, and Bordeaux. Most of the island's grocery stores are multi-stakeholder cooperatives that have strong relationships with local farmers. St. Thomas' many industries are part of regional federations, engaged in worker exchange programs, skill-sharing, and other forms of worker solidarity.⁷²

Historically, this is indeed how bursts of cooperative development have tended to go: people conducting local experiments out of necessity band together and build power sufficient to establish public policies, which unlock potential for far more.⁷³ Prefigure, replicate, and reintegrate into a new normal. Here again are adrienne maree brown's fractals and Alexis de Tocqueville's associations, along

with Grace Lee Boggs's belief that activists in the streets of Detroit could save the soul of the country that hollowed out their city. Here again is the modern feminist rediscovery of friendship as a foundational political bond. Democracy starts with seeds, and they grow if we let them.

Against the tenor of most policy discussions, I have insisted throughout this book on the political importance of everyday online life. Attending to everyday life means not ignoring policy but recognizing its connections to our most ordinary encounters. This chapter has stressed that everyday self-governance can be a strategy for policymaking, an approach for confronting many vexing challenges of online life. But doing so requires provisioning: providing resources to support self-governance and ceding power to it.

Turnbull's story is a hopeful one. With the aid of democratic machine-learning, global carbon emissions recede and islanders learn to weather their hurricanes in relative safety. I cannot claim that governable spaces will always turn out so well, at least at first. I offer no such promises. Self-governance is not a solution; it is a practice for problem-solving, and practices can go awry until they find their footing, until their participants learn the skills to manage them. But then, in governable spaces, our difficulties are our own and not someone else's. To have a future more democratic than the present, the structures of power today must embrace that risk.