



Call for Papers

The Promise and Perils of Human Rights for Governing Digital Platforms

Global Transformations and Governance Challenges Initiative

Leiden University, The Netherlands

18-19 January 2024

(hybrid format)

Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of digital platforms as the “core organisational form” of informational capitalism ([Cohen, 2017](#)). These algorithmically intermediated spaces constitute important sites of political, social, economic, and cultural exchange, typically underpinned by extractivist business models based on the collection, aggregation, analysis and exchange of data ([Wood and Monahan, 2019](#)). While platformisation is facilitating greater interconnection between different actors around the world, it is perceived by many as threatening and disruptive to core social and democratic values – whether in terms of the expansion of corporate power under informational capitalism ([Zuboff, 2019](#)), the reproduction of colonial power asymmetries ([Mejias and Couldry, 2019](#)), the “gigification” and precarisation of labour ([Acevado, 2020](#)), or the reification of racial inequalities ([Benjamin, 2019](#)).

Policymakers, civil society organisations, and academics around the world are therefore increasingly framing what had until recently been seen as a domain of private platform governance ([Gorwa, 2020](#)) through the framework of human rights and seeking to extend the principles of human rights law to govern digital platforms. These include civil and political rights, such as freedom of expression (including media pluralism), privacy, political participation and non-discrimination, as well as economic and social rights, such as labour rights, social security and an adequate standard of living (including food and housing).

Yet while human rights offer a salient language of social justice, it is unclear whether they are legally and conceptually adequate to address questions raised by the increasing platformisation of social life. Although many authors concerned about unaccountable power assume that human rights will effectively constrain it ([De Gregorio, 2022](#); [Jones, 2023](#)), critical literature suggests that the individualistic legal protections and non-confrontational language of human rights have been as likely to stabilise state and corporate power as to undermine it ([Moyn, 2019](#); [Viljoen, 2021](#)). Moreover, at a time of renewed regulatory efforts by states to rein in the power of digital platforms, the discourse of human rights has yet to see any sustained self-reflexivity over its potential and limits as a vocabulary of governance in this domain ([Griffin, 2023](#); [Douek, 2021](#), [Sander, 2021](#)). While human rights remain the dominant grammar of social justice claims, platformisation therefore invites critical reflection on whether alternative norms and frameworks of social justice are necessary.

This two-day workshop will examine the evolving relationship between human rights and digital platforms.



Centred on exploring the promise and perils of human rights for addressing the challenges posed by the governance of digital platforms, this workshop invites papers that engage with any of the following themes and questions:

- What kind of human rights issues do digital platforms raise?
- How does the emergence of artificial intelligence challenge and reframe the application and utility of human rights in the context of digital platforms?
- How are human rights currently being applied and (re-)conceptualised - by academics, civil society and other actors around the world - in the context of digital platforms?
- How might human rights frameworks be further reconceptualised in order to better address the harms and inequalities posed by digital platforms? Do these newly emerging harms and inequalities give rise to new types of moral claims not recognized within the existing legal frameworks?
- What constraints might human rights frameworks face, for example in terms of their application to different types of actors, in addressing new harms and inequalities related to digital platforms?
- What can digital platform governance learn from existing critical approaches to human rights – including, for example, critical approaches rooted in theoretical traditions such as feminist, queer, postcolonial, decolonial, and Marxist theory?
- What alternative ways of thinking, beyond human rights frameworks, could advance social justice in relation to digital platforms?

Guidelines for Submissions

The aim of the workshop is to foster an interdisciplinary exchange with leading experts from diverse academic disciplines and communities of practice, including but not limited to the fields of ethics and (political) philosophy, anthropology, and (international) law.

Applicants are invited to submit a non-anonymized abstract (maximum 300 words) in PDF format by email to digitalrightsplatforms@gmail.com no later than **30 September 2023**.

The applicants will be informed of our decision no later than **mid-October 2023**. We expect papers (of approximately 6,000-8,000 words) to be shared 10 days before the conference. Selected papers from the workshop will also be considered for inclusion in a symposium for an online peer-reviewed academic journal.

Financial Support

The workshop is funded by the Global Transformations and Governance Challenges Initiative at Leiden University. A limited amount of financial support for travel and accommodation is, therefore, available to speakers who have exhausted other potential sources of funding. A hybrid option will also be offered to enhance participation within the workshop.

Convenors:

Dr. Jelena Belic, Lecturer, Leiden University – Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences

Dr. Matthew Canfield, Assistant Professor, Leiden University – Faculty of Law

Rachel Griffin, Ph.D. Candidate, Sciences Po Law School

Dr. Henning Lahmann, Assistant Professor, Leiden University – Faculty of Law

Dr. Barrie Sander, Assistant Professor, Leiden University – Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs