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# Reshaping platform governmentality: The curious case of moderators' strike on Stack Exchange

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## Abstract

On June 4, 2023, moderators of the world's largest Q&A forum Stack Exchange (SE) initiated a strike after the platform prohibited them from removing content generated with artificial intelligence (AI). This conflict brought to the fore a continued tension between volunteer moderators and platform owners, where the norms of content moderation and the roles of both actor groups were called into question. Simultaneously, the strike and the negotiations that followed made visible the complex power relations typical to organizing on platforms, and reinforced the platform itself, more pronouncedly, to a space of power. In this study, we analyze the strike to interrogate platform governmentality by mapping the power mechanisms at play and the ways in which they were reshaped during the strike. Governmentality, deemed central to the analysis of power by Michel Foucault, is "*understood in the broad sense of techniques and procedures for directing human behavior*" (Foucault, 1997, p. 82). In the context of platform capitalism, the concept of governmentality is shaped by techno-economic logics, and operationalized through mechanisms rooted in both disciplinary and security regimes. Drawing on qualitative data from SE's meta-forums, we show how moderators—who occupy a hybrid position as both governed subjects and governance agents—mobilized resistance by repurposing moderation affordances, coordinating cross-platform action, and engaging in negotiations with platform leadership. While seemingly oppositional, their action sought to preserve a prior normative order rooted in human moderation and community-driven quality control. Their resistance emphasized the fragility of platform trust and exposed the tensions inherent in integrating generative AI into governance systems. The analysis contributes to platform studies by showing the intricate dialectic between power and resistance within digital platforms. First, we highlight that resistance on platforms may aim not to overthrow dominant structures but to defend a threatened balance of power. Second, we show how generative AI disrupts existing arrangements of platform governmentality by introducing new techno-economic priorities. Finally, we foreground the strategic agency of moderators as infrastructural actors who can both stabilize and contest platform governance.

**Keywords:** moderation, social media platforms, resistance, power, governmentality

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