

No Mods, No Masters: The Cyber-Libertarian Dream and the Inevitability of Content-Moderation Bureaucracy

James Grimmelmann

Cornell Law School; Cornell Tech

Benjamin Sobel (University of Wisconsin Law School) (co-author)

Cyberlibertarians, from the cypherpunks to the Crypto Punks, have dreamed of creating a digital world that escapes not just from state authority but from all forms of human control. Increasingly, they have identified content moderation, and the bureaucratic organizations that carry out content moderation at scale, as the Leviathan they seek to subvert or slay—often by replacing human moderators’ discretion with digital rules that protect freedom by embodying the relevant rules in immutable code.

We argue that this dream is a mirage. Content moderation is not for the most part an alien system imposed on digital communities from the outside. Instead, content moderation is the visible face of online dispute resolution, and as these communities grow, the only institutions capable of performing dispute resolution at scale are bureaucracies. Anywhere and everywhere that human societies have engaged in mass adjudication, they have converged on similar bureaucratic forms, from the clerks of Chancery to insurance claim processing departments. Online communities have developed content-moderation systems that imitate offline legal systems because any institution capable of doing the work they need to do will have the shape of a bureaucracy. Just as numerous life forms tend to evolve towards a crab-like body plan, all online communities over a moderate threshold of size tend to evolve a content-moderation bureaucracy.