

Theme A: Global Culture in the Digital Era

The New Digital Borders: Culture and Sovereignty in the Platform Age

In August 2024, a Brazilian Supreme Court justice [suspended](#) X, formerly Twitter, marking the nation's determination to limit the influence that a foreign-owned algorithm has over Brazil's public discourse. The suspension asserted that the boundaries of acceptable political speech inside Brazil would be drawn by Brazilian institutions, not by a company headquartered thousands of miles away.

Brazil is not alone. India [proposed](#) mandatory labeling of AI-generated content in early 2025; the European Union [codified](#) platform transparency requirements through the Digital Services Act in 2024; Kenya's High Court [ruled](#) in 2025 that Meta could be sued locally for the algorithmic amplification of hate speech, rejecting the company's claim that it was beyond the reach of Kenyan law.

These are not isolated regulatory episodes. They mark the end of the early utopian dream of a borderless cyberspace and the emergence of a global struggle: rather than being a neutral place for cultural display, the internet has become a battlefield where governments, companies, and individuals compete to shape public conversations. These governments are acting on the same recognition—that the platforms mediating their citizens' daily encounters with news, entertainment, history, and each other do not passively deliver information but actively [shape](#) what society sees and ultimately believes. To require that a platform operate under local law, label synthetic media, or negotiate over culturally sensitive content is to demand a voice in the machinery of cultural narration. Digital sovereignty is thus not just a matter of data security or censorship, but a struggle over a country's ability to narrate its own identity—to tell its own story to its people and the world. Yet that ability is increasingly mediated and often silently overwritten by a new kind of gatekeeper: the algorithmic platform.

Gatekeeper 2.0

This struggle began with the rise of platform power itself. As optimists of globalization once [predicted](#), Meta, Google, YouTube, X, and TikTok promised to amplify local voices without first waiting for the input of producers or editors in traditional media.

On platforms like [TikTok](#), although a musician from Nigeria, a K-pop idol from Korea, or an activist from Brazil can easily reach overseas audiences that once seemed unreachable, the same platforms have [become](#) the new gatekeepers, replacing newspaper editors or TV channel producers and deciding what gets seen, recommended, and amplified. Digital platforms [establish](#) systems that convert culture into data for extraction and prediction, in which every view, every share, and every imitation feeds the algorithm's model, determining what constitutes "engaging" culture for the world. The gatekeeper did not disappear; it has moved from the newsroom into the recommendation algorithm, which increasingly [rewards](#) forms of expression that are globally legible and commercially valuable.

The result is not merely a loss of diversity, but a [process](#) that has made us "docile consumers" and "flattened our likes and tastes." By tracking data, platforms reward a homogeneous global aesthetic through the repetitive [recommendations](#) of "similar content." Diverse cultures surface only when they mimic the short, high-energy, easily imitable format that the [algorithm favors](#). Local cultural forms must contort themselves into a marketable template or vanish. Creators and communities with limited resources, such as due to a restrained budget or a language barrier, are slowly losing their ability to keep their culture visible. Their stories are left behind by the recommendation algorithm.

The Narrative Core: Who Tells the Story

As visibility diminishes, algorithmic recommendations quietly marginalize entire cultural voices from the digital commons. Meta, the world's most [popular](#) platform, for example, [moderates](#) content in

only eight African languages, leaving close to 2,000 languages spoken by billions of people largely muted. In South Africa, content in Zulu and Xhosa has been [handled](#) by algorithms that could not parse cultural context, leaving harmful content online and making meaningful public discourse difficult. This is not simply a resource gap, but a structural [determination](#) of whose voice matters. Platforms built their moderation and recommendation systems around a handful of dominant languages—those that [drive](#) advertising revenue and global reach.

Thus, digital algorithms dictate who and what gets attention, and who and what gets ignored. Over time, as languages became less visible, the cultures attached to these languages also risk being erased. This exemplifies the nature of digital sovereignty in the digital era—a struggle over who has the authority to shape the narrative.

Global Endeavors to Hold the Pen

Recognizing that algorithmic infrastructure has silently expropriated the right to narrate, governments have begun to push back, devising a spectrum of strategies to reassert digital sovereignty on platforms where their citizens share and engage.

One approach is jurisdictional confrontation. Brazil's [suspension](#) of X demonstrated that even a large democratic state can require a foreign-owned algorithm to respect local judicial orders. This was not isolated: WhatsApp and Telegram had also previously been [restricted](#) by the Brazilian legal system for reasons relating to speech and privacy. These interventions, while effective in the endeavor of reclaiming digital sovereignty, nevertheless disrupt public discourse and [provoke](#) criticism domestically and internationally.

Kenya has similarly taken the digital sovereignty battle to the courtroom. In April 2025, the High Court [decided](#) that Meta could be sued in Kenya for allegedly allowing its algorithms to amplify hate speech in Ethiopian languages during the Tigray civil war, as the company's moderation hub had failed

to catch this speech. Meta argued that it could not be subjected to Kenya's legal proceedings because the company was not registered in the country. However, ruled that the company's algorithmic actions fall within Kenya's jurisdiction when they cause harm within its borders. This ruling is a clear [assertion](#) that the power to govern speech—to decide what content is harmful, and what protections citizens deserve—rests with the state, not with a international platform's internal moderation policies. However, because Kenya has not yet passed domestic legislation governing platform content [moderation](#), each similar case that appears before Kenyan courts must re-litigate the same jurisdictional battle.

China, on the other hand, [deals with](#) sovereignty through explicit legislative measures. The country's 2022 regulation concerning algorithmic recommendation services provides that digital recommendation, filtering, and ranking systems must [adhere to](#) principles of national security and public order. Legislative measures such as these restrict foreign platforms and strengthen the domestic digital ecosystem. Although they are highly effective at maintaining narrative control, [ensuring](#) that cultural visibility is shaped by state-defined priorities rather than foreign code, the cost is high. The legislative wall blocks external algorithms but also isolates citizens from the global cultural commons, risking official narratives becoming propaganda if the state's cultural priorities become the only allowed culture.

A Redefined, Ongoing Battle

The battle over global culture is ongoing, shifting from traditional media onto new infrastructures. Historically, governments and institutions have competed to shape how societies communicate. These struggle over the infrastructure of communication determine what makes culture visible and authoritative, as well as when.

Today, that infrastructure struggle is digital. In the digital era, the victory will belong to those who refuse to let that technology speak for itself—who insist, perhaps through law or regulation, that sovereignty is maintained in the platform age.