

DIGITAL FEUDALISM AND INFORMATION DISORDERS

ECREA post-conference on information disorders
Aarhus October 24th 2022

Jakob Linde Jensen, Ph.D.

Director of Centre for Internet Studies & associate professor of critical social media studies
School of Communication and Culture, Dep. of Media & Journalism Studies, Aarhus University
www.linde.net @jakoblinde

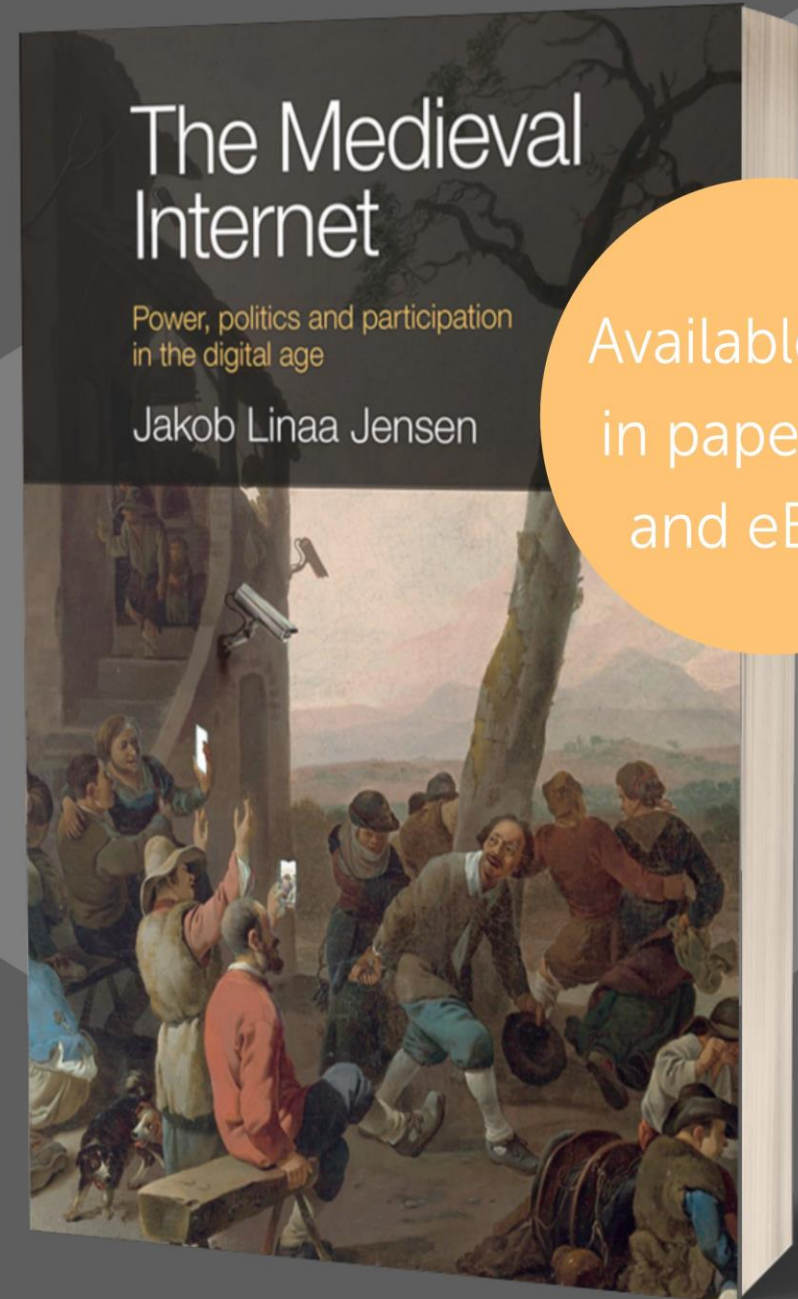
Benedetta Brevini, Ph.D.

Associate professor, University of Sydney
@grnsurveillance

The Medieval Internet

Power, politics and participation in the digital age

Jakob Linnaa Jensen



Available now
in paperback
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AGENDA

- The public and the public sphere
- Social media logics and algorithms
- Algorithms as hierarchy and “feudalism
- The resulting information disorders

THE PUBLIC SPHERE

- Associated with thinkers like Jürgen Habermas and John Dewey
- Central role as intermediary between citizens and politicians, facilitated by **media**
- Four functions:
 - "Weather cock" for public opinion
 - Connections between citizens and politicians
 - Articulation and pursuit of interests
 - Forum for problem-solving
- Assumption of **free flow of information**
- Assumption of a **liberal, autonomous subject**

LEGACY MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

- A special role in democracy
- Seen as vital for enlightenment and debate
- Public service media and certain privileges

- Open access
- Editing and publishing based on **transparent** criteria
- Possible to held **accountable** and **responsible**
- Example: in Denmark “Medieansvarsloven”

PLATFORMS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Platforms defined as digital media based on users, networks and extraction of user data and content

Datafication and commodification central in their business model (van Dijck, 2013)

Most important: editing, moderation and censorship based on **algorithms**

The latter is very different from legacy media and from liberal democratic principles of agency, transparency and accountability

**WE PROPOSE THE PROBLEM IS DIGITAL
FEUDALISM**

FEUDALISM

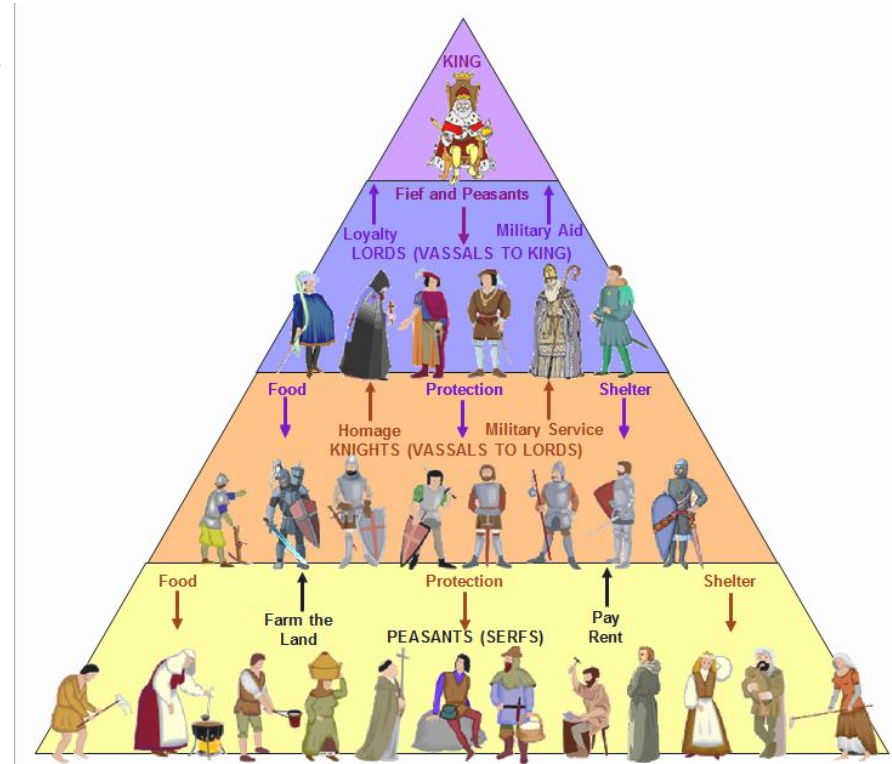
Marc Bloch (1961)

Society characterised by economic dominance

Based on threats and violence

Lords and servants

Dependencies



- Feudalism was characterised by a close connection between power, hierarchies and economy
- Feudalism was replaced by capitalism
- In **capitalism** political and economic power were in principle **decoupled**
- In **platform capitalism** political and economic power are **recoupled**
- We call the platform capitalism **digital feudalism**

CASE 1: FACEBOOK

- Originally a school network it has become the world's dominant online public sphere
- But mediation is based on invisible logics rather than transparency
- Rule defined by boards and stakeholders rather than elected actors

- Algorithms are the central mechanism defining **information flows** and **content**
- They regulate **visibility** and **invisibility**

CASE 2: AMAZON

Originally an online bookstore but now major information broker, one of the “big 5”

Amazon first to employ an algorithm for selection of content

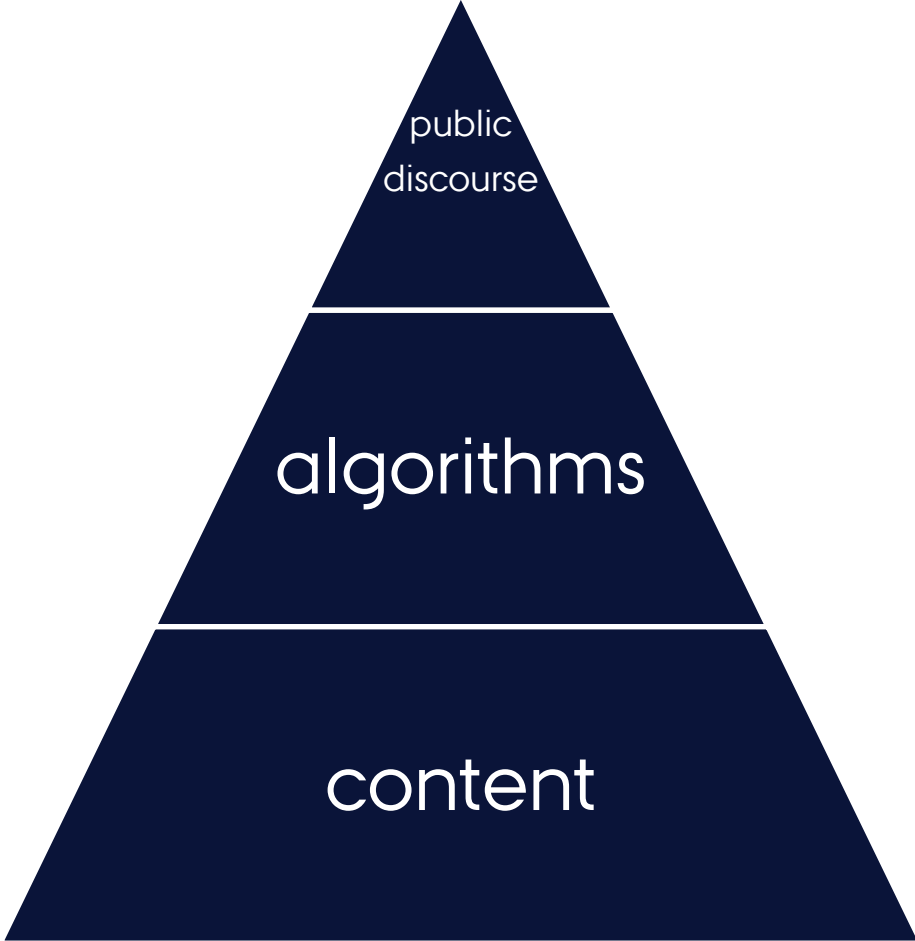
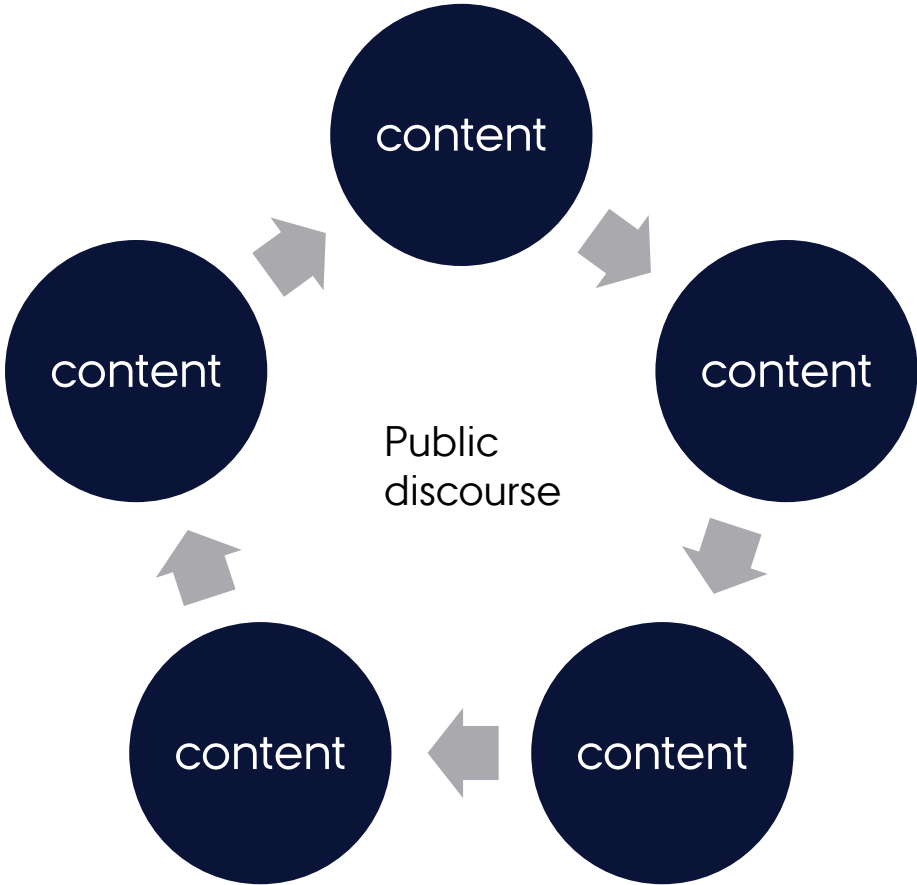
Based on the drive to sell more and be convenient

But Amazon creates its own ecosystem of tethered content

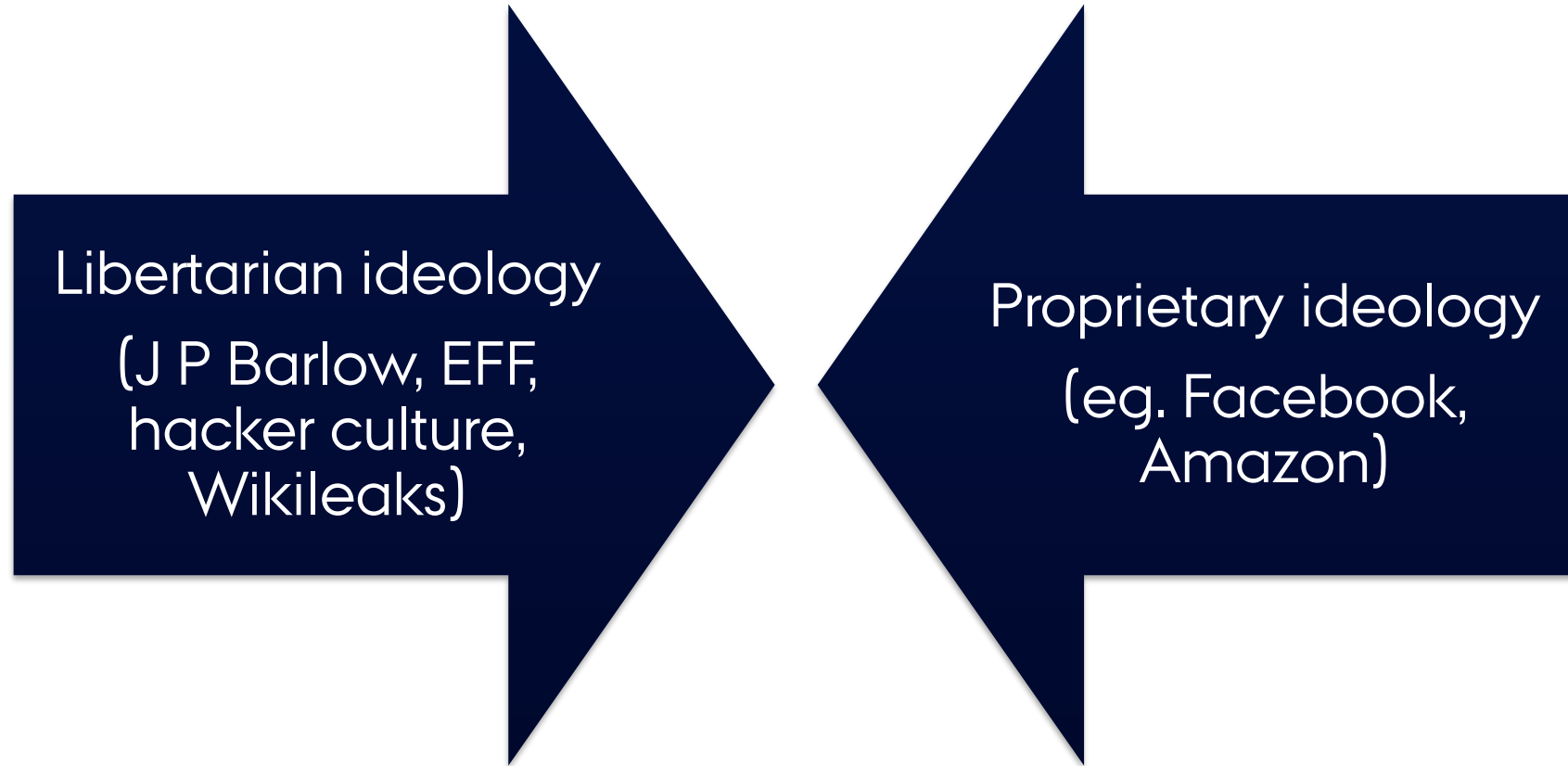
It relies on a business model of the exploitation of data from their customers

Together with the other big fives they create a feudal system of silos and mutual dependencies

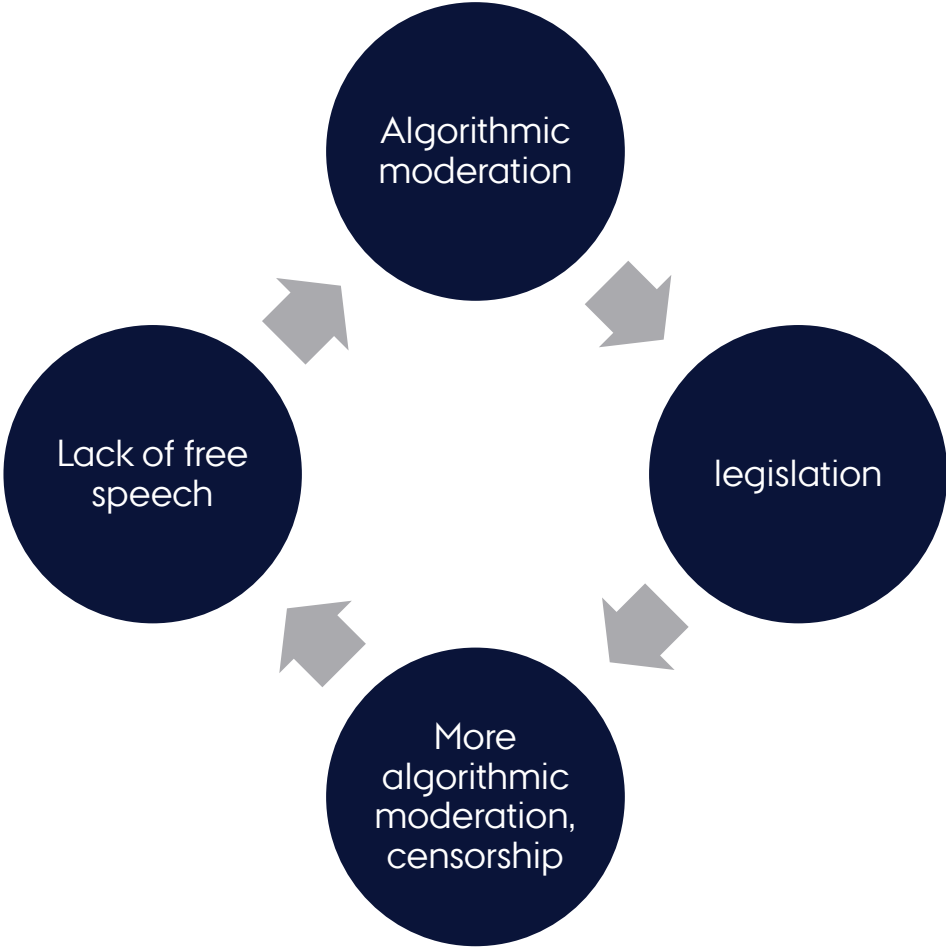
THE INTERNET: IDEALS AND REALITY



THE BATTLE OF INFORMATION ORDER



THE THREAT AGAINST PUBLIC DISCOURSE



THE DILEMMA

Tech companies in
the economic
realm

The diagram consists of two dark blue arrow-shaped boxes pointing towards each other, creating a central gap. The left box contains the text 'Tech companies in the economic realm' and the right box contains 'The public sphere, democracy. Values of openness and transparency'. The arrows are stylized with a rectangular base and a pointed tip.

The public sphere,
democracy. Values
of openness and
transparency

THANKS

Jakob Linaa Jensen

www.linaa.net

Twitter, Facebook: @jakoblinaa

E-mail: linaa@cc.au.dk