Corporate Quasi-Sovereignty:
Big Tech and the Politics of Sovereign Authority in the Digital Age

Chee Hae Chung[1] & Bryce Dietrich[2]

Suggested Citation:
Chung, Chee Hae and Dietrich, Bryce, Corporate Quasi-Sovereignty: Big Tech and the Politics of Sovereign Authority in the Digital Age (January 19, 2026). Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=6149489

Abstract
As private technology firms expand their control over critical infrastructures, questions of sovereignty and governance are increasingly displaced from states to corporate actors. Existing scholarship on sovereignty assumes that authority is either monopolized by states or shared through institutionalized public–private arrangements. Yet, recent events—from SpaceX's control of wartime communications in Ukraine to Meta's confrontation with the Australian government and OpenAI's attempts to shape global AI regulation—demonstrate that firms can exercise discretionary authority without formal delegation, legal accountability, or democratic oversight. This study introduces the concept of Corporate Quasi-Sovereignty (CQS) to theorize how certain technology firms function as de facto sovereign actors. CQS is defined by the convergence of three enabling dimensions: infrastructural command, executive autonomy, and normative or geopolitical assertion. To explain how these dimensions align into sovereign-like outcomes, the paper adapts Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) to conceptualize sovereignty windows: moments when firms internally align the problem, policy, and politics streams, allowing unilateral interventions with geopolitical and societal consequences. Drawing on comparative case analyses of Meta, SpaceX, and OpenAI, the article demonstrates how CQS captures both reactive and anticipatory modes of corporate authority. These findings show that firms now operate not only as market actors but as quasi-sovereign agents capable of substituting, bypassing, or preempting state power. The study contributes to theoretical debates on sovereignty and governance by revealing how political authority increasingly emerges through private infrastructures, executive discretion, and normative framing in the digital age.

Introduction

In the early days of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Elon Musk responded to an urgent request from the Ukrainian government by deploying SpaceX's Starlink satellite system to restore communications disrupted by Russian attacks. The move was hailed as a strategic lifeline. Months later, however, Musk reportedly denied Ukraine's request to extend Starlink coverage for a military operation in Crimea, effectively overriding a sovereign state's military objective (Kim et al., 2023). This change, first providing and then restricting a critical wartime infrastructure, reveals a

[1] Postdoctoral Research Associate, Governance and Responsible AI Lab (GRAIL) & Computational Social Science (CSS) Lab, Department of Political Science, Purdue University
[2] Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Purdue University;
Director, CSS Lab, Purdue University

striking development: a private CEO made decisions with direct consequences for the conduct of war.

However, this was not an isolated case. In 2021, Meta temporarily withdrew news services in Australia to protest legislation requiring it to compensate domestic publishers. The move, carried out in defiance of a democratically passed law, sparked national outrage and user backlash (Bossio et al., 2022). Although Meta ultimately reinstated services, it did so only after negotiating directly with the government, circumventing standard regulatory compliance.

These episodes are not conventional corporate disputes. They signal a structural transformation in the political economy of global governance, where private firms with infrastructural reach act as quasi-sovereign agents in law, security, and policy (Strange, 1996; Van Dijck et al., 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Existing sovereignty models (idealized, lived, quasi-, hybrid) have long recognized non-state influence, but they typically assume that legitimacy flows through delegation, institutional embedding, or negotiated consent (Krasner, 1999a; Lake, 2003; Sassen, 2008; Srivastava, 2022). Many contemporary technology firms can act outside those channels.

This article uses "Big Tech" in an analytically narrow sense: not the technology sector as a whole, but the subset of firms that combine (i) command over critical infrastructures (communications networks, cloud services, large-scale platforms), (ii) governance insulation that concentrates decision-making authority, and (iii) capacity to frame interventions as matters of public purpose. These characteristics allow exceptional instances of executive discretion to translate into social and geopolitical consequences.

This paper advances ***Corporate Quasi-Sovereignty (CQS):*** a condition in which private firms intervene in ways that approximate core functions of sovereignty without legal delegation or institutional accountability. CQS becomes possible when three enabling dimensions converge: infrastructural command, executive autonomy, and normative or geopolitical assertion (Bartelson, 1995).

To explain how these dimensions align into sovereign-like outcomes, the paper adapts Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) (Kingdon, 2011, 2014). MSF, originally developed to explain how problems, policies, and politics converge into "policy windows," is extended here to theorize "sovereignty windows": moments when streams converge inside firms, enabling them to exercise unilateral authority with geopolitical consequences.

The analysis proceeds in three parts: it first explains why existing sovereignty theories fail to capture this phenomenon; second, it defines CQS and sovereignty windows as a conceptual framework; and third, it illustrates the argument through three cases: Meta in Australia, SpaceX in Ukraine, and OpenAI in AI governance. Two questions organize the analysis: (1) under what conditions do private firms acquire the practical capacity to override or substitute for public authority, and (2) through what process do such capacities translate into discrete interventions with political and geopolitical consequences?

Sovereignty Theories, Policy Frameworks, and Their Limitations

Sovereignty is often treated as territorially bounded, indivisible authority associated with the Westphalian state (Bartelson, 1995; Hinsley, 1986). This form of sovereignty grants states authority within their borders and exclusive rights over internal governance and external recognition. This broader literature matters for CQS because it provides the baseline vocabulary, including state monopoly, negotiation, delegation, co-governance, against which contemporary platform and infrastructure firms appear anomalous.

As private corporations diversified and state-corporate relationships evolved, scholars extended sovereignty to capture its fragmented and negotiated forms of authority. Concepts such as idealized sovereignty, lived sovereignty, quasi-sovereignty, and hybrid sovereignty emerged to explain multilevel governance and shared authority (Krasner, 1999; Ruggie, 1993; Sassen, 2008). These approaches broadened the scope of sovereignty, but they share a critical assumption: that states remain the ultimate locus of authority and that non-state actors exercise power only through delegation, embedding, or negotiated consent. This assumption no longer holds. Big tech firms such as SpaceX, Meta, and Palantir could act outside these arrangements, exercising executive discretion and authority without institutional delegation.

In the digital era, sovereignty-relevant authority is often exercised through rules embedded in technical systems. Algorithmic governance can structure access to speech, information, and coordination without the visible mechanisms of public law. This creates a setting in which private actors may not simply influence states but can set de facto constraints on what states, publics, and civil society can do (Sassen, 2008; Strange, 1996; Zuboff, 2019).

Idealized sovereignty, grounded in Bodin and Hobbes, frames sovereignty as absolute, indivisible, and monopolized by the state (Bodin, 1992; Hobbes, 1996). This framework underpins classical realism and neorealism in IR, where states are unitary actors that exercise uncontested authority within their territory (Waltz, 1979). Under this model, the role of corporations is subordinate; firms operate within rules set and enforced by sovereign states. Historical infrastructure monopolies such as AT&T operated within, and were ultimately constrained by, domestic regulation and antitrust enforcement (Coll, 2017; Horwitz, 1986). By contrast, digital infrastructures can be transnational, modular, and embedded in daily governance functions. This makes it harder for states to rely on classic territorial tools when rule-setting and enforcement are mediated through privately controlled systems (Klonick, 2017).

Lived sovereignty emphasizes sovereignty as a practice negotiated among states, corporations, NGOs, and international organizations, often through soft law and legal grey zone (Agnew, 2005; Hall and Biersteker, 2002; Patrick, 2017). This captures many interactions between governments and platforms, including consultation, information sharing, and episodic cooperation. But it tends to assume symmetry and continuing bargaining. It fits poorly when infrastructural monopolies allow firms to impose faits accomplis—for example, by changing platform rules, restricting access, or withdrawing key services—thereby forcing states to react to decisions already executed (Zuboff, 2019).

Quasi-sovereignty, drawn from colonial and postcolonial contexts, describes actors exercising partial or conditional sovereignty (Benton, 2009; Lake, 2003). The East India Company (EIC) exemplifies this: it exercised near-complete control over Indian territories but was ultimately subject to British Parliament and Crown (Stern, 2011). This captures corporate power that is formally tethered to a state or empire. Leading technology firms, however, often draw authority from infrastructures states depend on, and can assert power without comparable external delegation. Their legitimacy may be contested, but their operational capacity is not necessarily conditional.

Hybrid sovereignty emphasizes the co-production of governance between public and private actors, particularly in areas such as health, security, and infrastructure (Srivastava, 2022). It explains defense contracting, standards setting, and polycentric cybersecurity governance (Shackelford, 2014). However, hybrid sovereignty falters when firms bypass co-production and exercise enforcement-like discretion. Where co-governance presumes shared rule-making and checks, CQS episodes can feature unilateral service withdrawal, discretionary restriction, or norm-setting that precedes and shapes regulation.

Table 1. Sovereignty Framework and Their Implications

Sovereignty Model	Core Assumptions	Examples	Limits in Explaining Big Tech Authority
Idealized Sovereignty (state monopoly)	• Authority is indivisible, territorially bounded, and monopolized by the state; corporations are subordinate to state law	• AT&T (20th-century regulated monopoly)	• Fails to account for algorithmic governance and cross-border infrastructures (e.g., Meta) that act without legislative approval
Lived Sovereignty (negotiated practice)	• Authority is contingent, negotiated among states, firms, and international organizations; corporations wield influence through legal grey areas or soft law	• Google negotiating data-sharing laws; Meta cooperating with electoral commissions	• Underestimates unilateral interventions (e.g., AWS's dominance in U.S. cloud services, Starlink in Ukraine) that constrain state capacity rather than negotiate with it
Quasi-Sovereignty (conditional authority)	• Non-state actors exercise partial or conditional sovereignty, mediated externally or recognized unevenly	• East India Company (colonial India)	• Cannot capture the autonomy of firms like Google or AWS, which set infrastructural norms states depend upon without conditional oversight
Hybrid Sovereignty (co-governance)	• Authority co-produced between public and private actors; states and firms are mutually dependent	• Palantir defense contracts; Microsoft's cybersecurity diplomacy	• Breaks down when firms bypass co-production, acting unilaterally (e.g., SpaceX restricting Starlink in wartime)

Across these four variants, sovereignty is conceptualized as state-centered, whether monopolized (idealized), negotiated (lived), conditional (quasi), or co-produced (hybrid). What is missing is a concept that captures the combination of (i) infrastructural indispensability, (ii) governance insulation, and (iii) executive claims to legitimate intervention that together enable discretionary, norm-breaking acts with public and geopolitical consequences. CQS is designed to fill that gap.

This limitation connects to a longer debate about corporate power and state authority. Globalization scholarship long contested whether multinational corporations were usurping nominal state sovereignty (Held and McGrew, 2007; Hirst et al., 2015). More recent work has examined business power through Marxist state theory (Hunter et al., 2023) and neo-pluralist frameworks analyzing institutional sources of business influence (Babic et al., 2022; Busemeyer and Thelen, 2020). These traditions rightly emphasize that corporate-state tensions are not new. What distinguishes CQS is not corporate power *per se* but its form: infrastructural, discretionary, and enacted through technical systems that states increasingly depend on yet cannot easily regulate or replace. Digital sovereignty debates (Mayer and Nock, 2025) also engage these tensions, but often focus on state strategies to reassert control rather than theorizing how corporate authority operates in institutional voids.

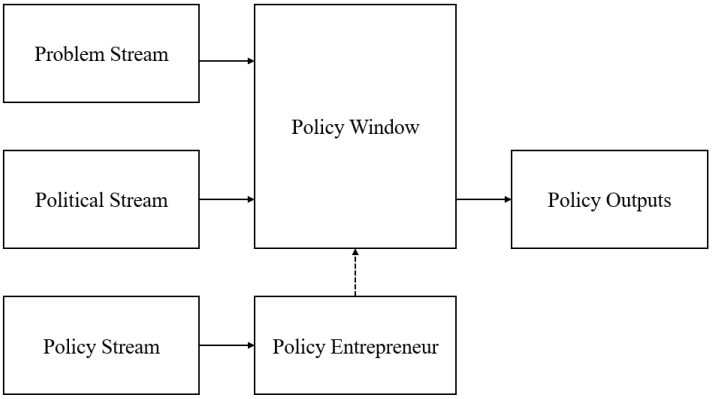
Revisiting the Multiple Streams Framework: Why and How It Applies to CQS

To capture how authority is enacted under ambiguity and crisis, I turn to policy process scholarship, and particularly Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) (Kingdon, 2011, 2014). MSF explains change as the contingent alignment of three relatively independent streams: problems (conditions that become defined as requiring action), policies (a "primeval soup" of proposals refined by specialists),

and politics (shifts in mood, leadership, or coalition support). When the streams align, a policy window opens and policy entrepreneurs couple streams to move an item onto the agenda (Cairney and Zahariadis, 2016; Zahariadis, 2019).

MSF is especially suited to theorizing Corporate Quasi-Sovereignty (CQS) for three reasons. First, it is processual rather than structural. It focuses not on who holds authority, but on how and when authority is exercised, essential for understanding episodic, discretionary corporate interventions. Second, it emphasizes timing and stream alignment over institutional stability, explaining how firms can act quickly when public institutions are fragmented or slow. Third, it was designed for decision-making under ambiguity and bounded rationality, conditions that typify contemporary platform governance. However, MSF's standard assumptions, including decentralized actors, independent streams, public arenas, do not hold in corporate contexts. Firms often concentrate decision-making in opaque hierarchies, bypass deliberation through internal rule-setting (Gillespie, 2018), and insulate executives through structures like dual-class shares (Gorwa, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). In these contexts, the entrepreneur is not simply a skilled broker navigating institutional access; the entrepreneur can be the executive who controls the arena.

Figure 1. Kingdon's MSF Framework



The adaptation proposed here is therefore not a simple "application" of MSF to new actors; it is a refinement targeted at a specific mechanism: the internalization of streams within firms. Where MSF treats coupling as an achievement across institutional boundaries, sovereignty windows treat stream collapse as the relevant process. This shift preserves MSF's insight that timing and alignment matter, while making explicit that the location of alignment, and the constraints on the entrepreneur, are different when authority is concentrated inside corporate hierarchies.

In *CQS* episodes, the streams can be internalized within the firm. Executives can define a crisis, activate an infrastructural response, and authorize or withhold action without awaiting public ratification. Rather than coupling streams across institutions, a founder-CEO may collapse them within a single organizational hierarchy. This motivates an adaptation of MSF that is explicitly corporate and sovereignty-focused.

Theoretical Framework: Defining CQS

Conceptualizing CQS

Corporate Quasi-Sovereignty (CQS) refers to a political-economic condition in which private technology firms, particularly founder-led entities, exercise functions that approximate state sovereignty without formal delegation, legal recognition, or institutional accountability (Strange, 1996; Van Dijck et al., 2018; Zuboff, 2019). CQS is therefore not synonymous with corporate lobbying, multinational power, or public-private partnership. Nor can it be reduced to delegated authority. It is an

analytically narrow category: only some firms possess the infrastructures, governance insulation, and narrative capacity to override or substitute for public authority in consequential moments.

Three enabling dimensions make CQS possible:

Normative and geopolitical assertion captures the capacity of firms to frame their interventions as serving collective values while shaping domains traditionally reserved for states, including law, diplomacy, and security. Unlike routine corporate lobbying, CQS firms present themselves as moral or civilizational actors. Firms claim legitimacy through mission narratives and public-facing governance devices (e.g., oversight boards, "safety" frameworks) and can position themselves as custodians of the public good (Bartelson, 1995; Zuboff, 2019). These actions amount to forms of symbolic sovereignty, where legitimacy is claimed not through law but through narrative framing, ideological justification, and infrastructural dominance.

Infrastructural command refers to a firm's direct control over socio-technological systems that are functionally equivalent to state infrastructure. Sovereignty has historically relied on infrastructural power, understood as the capacity to project authority across space, enforce compliance, and sustain collective life (DeNardis, 2020; Mann, 2012). In the digital era, firms such as SpaceX, Meta, and Palantir command infrastructures that enable military and civilian communication, mediate global speech and information flows, and govern decision-making and surveillance through artificial intelligence (AI) (Gillespie, 2018; Wu, 2011). These infrastructures are not merely commercial assets but politically constitutive. They grant private firms the capacity to intervene in crises, reshape discourse, and establish operational norms without state oversight (DeNardis, 2020).

Executive autonomy describes the degree to which a firm's leadership, often founder-CEOs, can make strategic decisions independently of shareholders, boards, or regulatory institutions. Classic corporate governance models, such as principal-agent theory, assume mechanisms of oversight through boards and shareholder accountability. However, many CQS firms employ dual-class share structures, dominant ownership, and personalized leadership that insulate executives from constraint (Gorwa, 2019b). This autonomy enables what comparative politics literature calls personal rule, where authority is exercised by executive fiat rather than deliberation. This insulation matters because it reduces the friction that normally separates corporate strategy from public authority. In certain settings, executive discretion can resemble sovereign prerogative more than negotiated governance.

Each dimension is necessary but insufficient. Infrastructural control without executive insulation can be checked through governance; autonomy without infrastructure may not translate into societal leverage; and normative claims without the capacity to act are symbolic. Empirically, CQS should be most visible where (a) a firm controls a bottleneck resource, (b) decision authority is concentrated, and (c) the firm's intervention is justified as a matter of collective risk or public purpose. CQS thus captures not a stable identity, but a threshold crossed in particular moments.

CQS relates to, but is not reducible to, existing sovereignty models. Firms may participate in lived or hybrid sovereignty through negotiated arrangements, and they may resemble quasi-sovereigns when legitimacy is contested or conditional. CQS names a sharper condition: authority that is self-claimed, infrastructurally grounded, and exercised through discretionary decision-making. In many cases, this authority is also symbolic: firms' legitimate intervention by narrating a mission (safety, freedom, humanity) and by building governance devices that imitate public accountability without being bound by it.

From Dimensions to Sovereignty Windows

MSF provides a natural processual mapping. In CQS contexts, normative/geopolitical assertion corresponds to the problem stream (how a crisis is defined), infrastructural command corresponds to the policy stream (what can be deployed), and executive autonomy corresponds to the politics stream (who can decide and whether action is authorized). A sovereignty window opens when these streams align inside the firm, enabling an intervention with sovereign-like consequences.

This mapping also clarifies why sovereignty windows often appear in institutional voids or crises. When public institutions lack rapid technical capacity, or when legal authority is fragmented across jurisdictions, firms with ready-to-use infrastructures can become the *de facto* site of decision. Alignment is therefore not only about opportunity; it is about capacity to act when others cannot.

Crucially, the CEO often functions as a conditional policy entrepreneur: not merely exploiting a window, but helping create it by framing the problem, mobilizing infrastructure, and asserting legitimacy. The outputs are not laws enacted through public institutions, but corporate interventions, such as service withdrawal, access restriction, emergency provision, standards setting, that reshape the feasible space of governance.

This process account also generates observable implications. Sovereignty windows should be most likely where infrastructures are hard to substitute quickly, where executives face weak internal veto points, and where crisis narratives resonate with publics or policymakers. Conversely, windows should be rarer when states maintain credible alternatives, when corporate governance disperses decision rights, or when legitimacy claims are publicly contested. These expectations can guide future empirical work on when corporate authority expands or contracts.

Sovereignty Windows

CQS does not imply continuous corporate sovereignty. It implies episodic authority that becomes visible when a sovereignty window opens. Two features distinguish sovereignty windows from conventional policy windows.

First, streams may collapse. In classical MSF, stream independence creates uncertainty and makes coupling strategic. In sovereignty windows, a single executive can control all three streams: defining a crisis (problem), activating infrastructure (policy), and deciding whether and how to act (politics). Stream collapse is thus the mechanism that converts infrastructural dominance into discretionary authority.

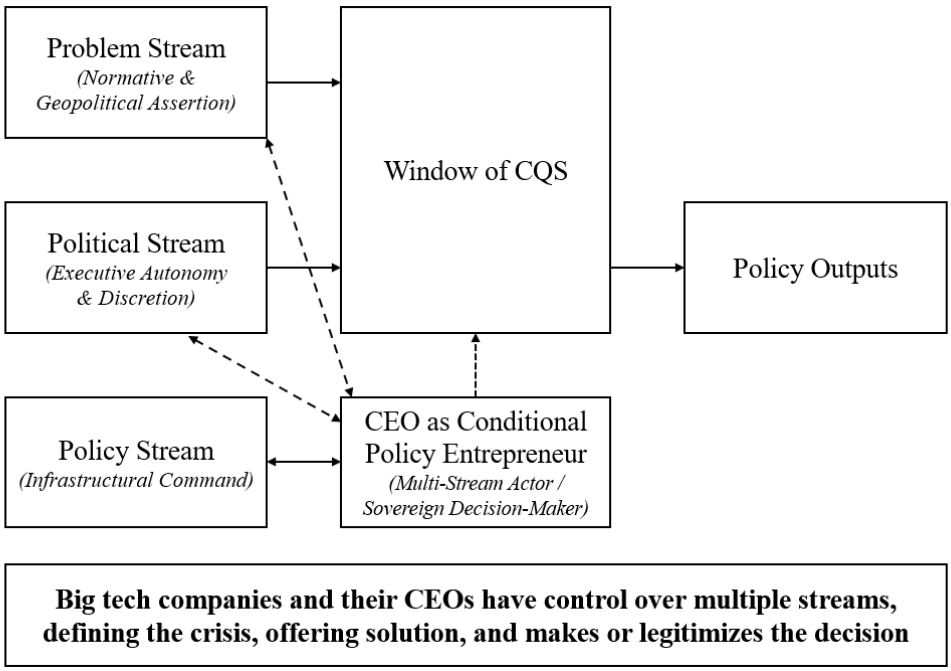
Second, outputs are governance effects rather than institutionalized policy. Sovereignty windows can produce actions such as restricting communications during a war, reconfiguring access to news in a national information system, or setting *de facto* standards for AI safety. These actions may later be contested or regulated, but at the moment of intervention the firm can bypass many of the procedural constraints that structure public decision-making. Sovereignty windows can be reactive (triggered by war, regulation, or scandal) or constructed (created by firms through anticipatory risk narratives). They also unfold within interdependencies: states can retaliate, publics can mobilize, and civil society can impose reputational costs. Yet the analytic point is asymmetry at the decisive moment: when a firm's infrastructure is indispensable and decision authority is insulated, external contestation may be temporarily unable to prevent or reverse action.

Finally, sovereignty windows illuminate why CQS behavior can exceed a narrow profit-maximization story. Market incentives help build infrastructures and shape strategic positioning, but CQS episodes often involve executive claims about public values and geopolitical risk. The intersection of market logic and sovereign logic is therefore central: profit considerations may constrain or motivate corporate action, but they do not fully explain discretionary interventions that reconfigure governance.

Sovereignty windows can close for several reasons: alternative infrastructures reduce dependence; legal and diplomatic pressure raises the costs of discretion; or public backlash undermines the firm's claim to legitimacy. These closure dynamics matter analytically because they locate CQS within ongoing contestation rather than treating corporate authority as a one-way displacement of the state. The point is not that states have become irrelevant, but that the timing and locus of governance can shift, sometimes abruptly, into private organizations that are not designed for democratic accountability.

Importantly, sovereignty windows need not be purely executive inventions. External focusing events, such as war, legislative action, and infrastructure failure, can force rapid decisions, while internal organizational routines determine whether those decisions are centralized or constrained. The framework therefore directs attention to both external triggers and internal governance design: how problems are framed, who has authority to activate infrastructure, and what procedures (if any) discipline discretionary action.

Figure 2. A Modified MSF Framework for Analyzing Corporate Quasi-Sovereignty (CQS)



From Sovereignty Models to Corporate Quasi-Sovereignty: A Comparative Case Analysis

The framework is illustrated through three cases that vary in policy domain and temporal orientation but share the core dynamics of CQS: Meta's confrontation with the Australian state over news regulation, SpaceX's control of Starlink in Ukraine, and OpenAI's central role in shaping emergent AI governance. The cases are used comparatively to show how different sovereignty models (lived, hybrid, quasi) can give way to CQS when a sovereignty window opens.

Analytically, the cases are treated as structured comparisons: each is described in terms of (1) the crisis or conflict that is framed as a problem, (2) the infrastructure that makes rapid intervention possible, and (3) the governance structure that concentrates discretion. This strategy keeps the focus on mechanisms rather than on firm-specific idiosyncrasies.

Meta and the Australian News Ban (2021): Legislating Against the Legislature

In early 2021, the Australian Parliament passed the News Media Bargaining Code, requiring platforms like Meta (formerly Facebook) and Google to compensate local news publishers for hosting and linking to their content. The legislation marked a global precedent in mandating platform accountability to national media ecosystems. In response, Meta removed all news content from its Australian platform, blocking both domestic and international news sources for Australian users (Taylor and AAP, 2024; Toh, 2021; Vanian, 2024). The decision was implemented rapidly and unilaterally, bypassing normal regulatory dialogue and triggering widespread criticism from journalists, civil society, and government officials. Following intense backlash, private negotiations between Meta and the Australian government took place behind the scenes, resulting in legislative amendments to the News Media Bargaining Code (Gollom, 2023; Khalil, 2021). These amendments granted platforms greater discretion to avoid mandatory arbitration by striking private deals with publishers. Although Meta ultimately restored access after private negotiations with the government, the incident demonstrated the company's infrastructural control over information flows and its willingness to use that control to challenge national legislation.

Meta's 2021 confrontation with the Australian government illustrates how sovereignty windows can emerge from regulatory conflict. At first glance, the case fits lived sovereignty: the News Media Bargaining Code forced negotiation between state and firm. But Meta escalated into CQS when it withdrew all news content from its Australian platform overnight, bypassing legislative authority.

Here, the problem stream was not simply the Code itself but the narrative Meta constructed: that the law endangered the "open internet" by privileging publishers and undermining global digital norms. The policy stream resided in Facebook's infrastructural power to control visibility and access to news, an infrastructural monopoly that allowed the company to enact immediate sanctions against a state. The politics stream was concentrated in Zuckerberg's executive autonomy: insulated by dual-class shares, his leadership group made the decision without shareholder oversight. The entrepreneurial coupling occurred when Meta's leadership not only collapsed the streams but justified their intervention through normative claims of protecting internet freedom. Meta's unilateral action created a sovereignty window: the firm became a veto actor capable of overriding parliamentary sovereignty.

SpaceX and Starlink in Ukraine (2022–2023): Substituting for Sovereignty

During Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Ukrainian government urgently requested communication support after widespread infrastructure damage. Elon Musk responded by activating SpaceX's Starlink satellite internet system across Ukraine, providing a crucial lifeline for military coordination, humanitarian relief, and civil communication (Capoot, 2022; Ives, 2022; Tucker et al., 2022). Initially celebrated as a philanthropic act, the deployment revealed how a single private firm could substitute for state or intergovernmental infrastructure (Sheetz, 2022). However, the relationship soured when reports emerged in 2023 that Musk had denied a request to extend Starlink coverage near Crimea, citing fears of escalating the war. This incident reframed Starlink not as a neutral service but as a geopolitical actor, operated at the discretion of its CEO, capable of shaping battlefield outcomes without public oversight.

The problem stream was framed twice by Musk: first as a humanitarian crisis of civilian connectivity (echoed in official SpaceX communications), then as a geopolitical crisis of nuclear escalation. The policy stream was Starlink's satellite infrastructure, a globally deployable network that states lacked the capacity to replicate in real time. The politics stream lay in Musk's personal discretion, derived from his near-absolute control over SpaceX and Starlink. Unlike AT&T's regulated monopoly, there was no institutional check on this discretion. Musk himself became the policy entrepreneur, collapsing the streams by reframing Ukraine's sovereignty problem as his own to solve or constrain.

This sovereignty window reveals the starkest form of CQS: the authority to determine the parameters of war and peace. Here, the CEO functioned not as a lobbyist or partner but as a *de facto* sovereign actor.

OpenAI and AI Governance (2023–present): Governing the Future

In the wake of rapid advances in generative AI, OpenAI positioned itself at the center of global debates about the risks and regulation of AI. In 2023, CEO Sam Altman launched a public campaign calling for new governance frameworks to address the potential dangers of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) (Iyengar, 2023; Vincent, 2023). OpenAI released policy proposals, safety protocols, and invited regulatory collaboration, while simultaneously continuing to develop powerful new models. Altman testified before the U.S. Senate and met with world leaders, presenting OpenAI not just as a company but as a custodian of humanity's technological future (Clayton, 2023; West, 2023; Zorthian, 2023). By defining the risks, proposing institutional solutions, and asserting moral leadership, OpenAI sought to preempt external regulation and shape the global AI governance agenda on its own terms (Sorkin et al., 2023).

Altman's influence during the Senate hearings was so pronounced that one senator, John Kennedy of Louisiana, half-jokingly asked whether Altman himself should lead the regulatory agency he was proposing. When Altman declined, Kennedy pressed him to suggest alternative candidates, effectively inviting the CEO to shape the very institution meant to oversee his own company. This moment signaled a troubling credulity among lawmakers and the risk of regulatory capture (Perrigo, 2023). Altman's ability to define the problem, propose the governing solution, and influence its leadership exemplifies a sovereignty window in anticipatory governance, where firms not only participate in regulation but

effectively script its architecture.

Where Meta and SpaceX acted in response to immediate conflicts, OpenAI illustrates how sovereignty windows can emerge from anticipatory governance. By defining AGI as an existential threat, OpenAI created the problem stream itself: a civilizational challenge demanding regulation.

The policy stream was anchored in OpenAI's proprietary models, safety protocols, and governance proposals. These were not abstract recommendations but ready-to-use infrastructures that states often lacked the technical expertise to contest. The politics stream was embodied in Sam Altman's executive autonomy: as CEO of a capped-profit entity with board volatility, Altman faced limited institutional constraint. His lobbying tour across Europe and testimony to the U.S. Senate stressed his role as both a corporate leader and global political actor.

Altman functioned as the policy entrepreneur who collapsed the streams: he framed the risk, offered OpenAI's models as solutions, and presented himself as the legitimate voice of "humanity." This sovereignty window highlights the normative dimension of CQS: unilateral claims to regulate the future of human governance through private initiative.

Taken together, these cases show that Big Tech firms are not fixed as lived, hybrid, or quasi-sovereigns. They oscillate between these forms but become CQS when all four elements align into a sovereignty window. Their authority is internalized, insulated, and enacted by executives who simultaneously define problems, mobilize infrastructures, and legitimate interventions. This marks the distinctiveness of CQS in the digital age: sovereignty has not disappeared, but it has migrated into corporate infrastructures and executive discretion.

Implications and Conclusion

The emergence of CQS highlights a fundamental reconfiguration of political authority in the digital age. By revisiting sovereignty theory and adapting Kingdon's MSF, this paper has demonstrated that firms are not merely regulatory subjects or interest groups but can function as quasi-sovereign actors when infrastructural command, executive autonomy, and normative assertion converge. Rather, contemporary firms increasingly internalize sovereignty within their organizational structures, collapsing Kingdon's streams inside the firm itself.

Theoretically, this paper makes two contributions. First, it extends sovereignty theory by shifting the analytical focus from states and international institutions to infrastructures controlled by private actors. Existing models of delegated, embedded, pooled, or hybrid sovereignty presuppose that ultimate authority remains anchored in state institutions. CQS challenges this assumption, showing that authority can be self-claimed, infrastructurally grounded, and exercised without negotiation or delegation. Second, it advances policy process scholarship by adapting MSF to corporate contexts. Where Kingdon conceptualized policy windows as fleeting alignments of problem, policy, and politics streams within institutional settings, the notion of sovereignty windows reveals how these alignments occur internally within firms. CEOs function not as constrained entrepreneurs navigating institutional access but as conditional policy entrepreneurs who simultaneously define crises, mobilize infrastructures, and authorize interventions. This dual theoretical move demonstrates how political science must expand beyond state-centric assumptions to account for novel loci of sovereign-like authority.

Practically, the rise of CQS introduces systemic risks for governance and democratic accountability. States increasingly depend on firms for vital infrastructures, from satellite networks to content moderation systems, yet this dependence erodes their capacity to regulate. In moments of crisis, decisions about war, elections, or information access may rest not with parliaments or bureaucracies but with insulated executives. This dynamic creates vulnerabilities: sovereignty windows open when firms collapse problem framing, infrastructural solutions, and executive discretion within themselves, allowing them to act as *de facto* governors. The challenge is not only that firms wield sovereign-like power but that their authority lacks procedural accountability, transparency, and legitimacy traditionally associated with state sovereignty.

Normatively, these developments demand renewed attention to legitimacy. State sovereignty derives its legitimacy from law, consent, and democratic institutions, while corporate sovereignty is asserted through infrastructural indispensability, ideological missions, and narrative framing. Such symbolic sovereignty is powerful yet precarious, vulnerable to public backlash, regulatory contestation,

or technological disruption. Sovereignty windows are therefore not permanent transformations but contingent openings, shaped by infrastructural dependence, executive discretion, and political acceptance.

Taken together, the analysis of CQS advances both theoretical and policy debates. It contributes to sovereignty scholarship by demonstrating how authority can be privatized, contingent, and enacted in a processual manner through infrastructures and executive autonomy. It enriches policy process theory by showing how the dynamics of stream convergence operate outside institutional arenas, collapsing into corporate hierarchies. And it highlights urgent policy questions regarding how democratic systems can respond to corporate actors who increasingly govern without being governed.

The broader implication is that political science and governance studies must recalibrate their analytical frameworks for a world in which sovereignty is fractured, contingent, and at times privatized. Whether CQS remains episodic or becomes institutionalized will depend on future struggles over legitimacy, regulation, and infrastructural dependence. What is already clear is that the strategic decisions of executives cannot be reduced to corporate strategy. They are acts of governance with consequences for democracy, security, and international order.

References

Abbott KW and Snidal D (2021) The governance triangle: Regulatory standards institutions and the shadow of the state. In: *The Spectrum of International Institutions*. Routledge, pp. 52–91.

ABC News (2021) Facebook restricts Australians' access to news. Why couldn't Canada? *ABC News*, 17 February. Available at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-18/facebook-to-restrict-sharing-or-viewing-news-in-australia/13166208 (accessed 7 October 2025).

Ackrill R, Kay A and Zahariadis N (2013) Ambiguity, multiple streams, and EU policy. *Journal of European Public Policy* 20(6): 871–887.

Agnew J (2005) Sovereignty Regimes: Territoriality and State Authority in Contemporary World Politics. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95(2): 437–461.

Babic M, Huijzer J, Garcia-Bernardo J, et al. (2022) How does business power operate? A framework for its working mechanisms. *Business and Politics* 24(2). Cambridge University Press: 133–150.

Bartelson J (1995) *A Genealogy of Sovereignty*. Cambridge University Press.

Benton L (2009) *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900*. Cambridge University Press.

Birkland TA (1998) Focusing events, mobilization, and agenda setting. *Journal of Public Policy* 18(1). Cambridge University Press: 53–74.

Bodin J (1992) *On Sovereignty: Four Chapters from the Six Books of the Commonwealth*. Cambridge University Press.

Bossio D, Flew T, Meese J, et al. (2022) Australia's News Media Bargaining Code and the global turn towards platform regulation. *Policy & Internet* 14(1): 136–150.

Brundage M, Avin S, Clark J, et al. (2024) The Malicious Use of Artificial Intelligence: Forecasting, Prevention, and Mitigation. arXiv:1802.07228. arXiv. Available at: http://arxiv.org/abs/1802.07228 (accessed 2 September 2025).

Buchanan JM and Tullock G (1965) *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional*

Democracy. University of Michigan Press.

Burns JM (1978) Leadership and followership. *Leadership*: 18–23.

Busemeyer MR and Thelen K (2020) Institutional sources of business power. *World Politics* 72(3). Cambridge University Press: 448–480.

Cairney P and Wellstead A (2020) COVID-19: effective policymaking depends on trust in experts, politicians, and the public. *Policy Design and Practice*: 1–14.

Cairney P and Zahariadis N (2016) Multiple streams approach: a flexible metaphor presents an opportunity to operationalize agenda setting processes. In: *Handbook of Public Policy Agenda Setting*. Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 87–105.

Capoot A (2022) 'The hell with it': Elon Musk tweets SpaceX will 'keep funding Ukraine govt for free' amid Starlink controversy. Available at: https://www.cnbc.com/2022/10/15/elon-musk-tweets-on-starlink-well-just-keep-funding-ukraine-govt-for-free.html (accessed 7 October 2025).

Cath C (2018) Governing Artificial Intelligence: Ethical, Legal and Technical Opportunities and Challenges. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 376(2133): 20180080.

Chin MK, Hambrick DC and Treviño LK (2013) Political Ideologies of CEOs: The Influence of Executives' Values on Corporate Social Responsibility. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 58(2): 197–232.

Clayton J (2023) Sam Altman: CEO of OpenAI calls for US to regulate artificial intelligence. *BBC*, 17 May. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65616866 (accessed 7 October 2025).

Cohen MD, March JG and Olsen JP (1972) A garbage can model of organizational choice. *Administrative Science Quarterly*. JSTOR: 1–25.

Coll S (2017) *The Deal of the Century: The Breakup of AT&T*. Open Road Media.

Dahl RA (2005) *Who Governs?: Democracy and Power in an American City*. Yale University Press.

DeNardis L (2020) *The Internet in Everything*. Yale University Press.

Dirks NB (2006) *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*. Harvard University Press.

Exworthy M and Powell M (2004) Big Windows and Little Windows: Implementation in the 'Congested State'. *Public Administration* 82(2): 263–281.

Gilpin RG (2016) *The Political Economy of International Relations*. Princeton University Press.

Gollom M (2023) Australia made a deal to keep news on Facebook. Why couldn't Canada? *CBC News*, 3 August. Available at: https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/meta-australia-google-news-canada-1.6925726 (accessed 7 October 2025).

Goodman J, Sardarizadeh S, Robinson O, et al. (2021) Facebook in Australia: What happened after news was blocked? *BBC*, 20 February. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/56127158

(accessed 2 September 2025).

Gorwa R (2019a) The Platform Governance Triangle: Conceptualising the Informal Regulation of Online Content. *Internet Policy Review* 8(2). Berlin: Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society: 1–22.

Held D and McGrew A (2007) *Globalization/Anti-Globalization: Beyond the Great Divide*. Polity.

Herweg N, Zahariadis N and Zohlnhöfer R (2023) The multiple streams framework: Foundations, refinements, and empirical applications. In: *Theories of the Policy Process*. Routledge, pp. 29–64.

Higley J and Burton MG (2006) *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Hill MD, Kelly GW, Lockhart GB, et al. (2013) Determinants and Effects of Corporate Lobbying. *Financial Management* 42(4): 931–957.

Hirst P, Thompson G and Bromley S (2015) *Globalization in Question*. John Wiley & Sons.

Hobbes T (1894) *Leviathan*. G. Routledge and sons.

Horwitz RB (1986) For whom the Bell tolls: Causes and consequences of the AT&T divestiture. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3(2): 119–154.

Hunter R, Khachaturian R and Nanopoulos E (2023) *Marxism and the Capitalist State: Towards a New Debate*. Springer Nature.

Ives M (2022) Starlink Satellite Internet Terminals, Sent by Elon Musk, Arrive in Ukraine. *The New York Times*, 1 March. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/28/world/europe/elon-musk-satellite-internet-ukraine.html (accessed 7 October 2025).

Iyengar R (2023) OpenAI's CEO Goes on a Diplomatic Charm Offensive. In: *Foreign Policy*. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/06/20/openai-ceo-diplomacy-artificial-intelligence/ (accessed 7 October 2025).

Jayanti A (2023) Starlink and the Russia-Ukraine War: A Case of Commercial Technology and Public Purpose?.

Jensen MC and Meckling WH (2019) Theory of the firm: Managerial behavior, agency costs and ownership structure. In: *Corporate Governance*. Gower, pp. 77–132.

John RR (2010) Introduction: Inventing American Telecommunications. In: *Network Nation: Inventing American Telecommunications*. Harvard University Press, pp. 1–4.

Jordan D (2023) Elon Musk says he withheld Starlink over Crimea to avoid escalation. *BBC*, 8 September. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66752264 (accessed 7 October 2025).

Khalil S (2021) Facebook and Google news law passed in Australia. *BBC*, 25 February. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-56163550 (accessed 7 October 2025).

Kim V, Pérez-Peña R and Kramer AE (2023) Elon Musk Refused to Enable Ukraine Drone Attack on Russian Fleet. *The New York Times*, 8 September. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/08/world/europe/elon-musk-ukraine-starlink-drones.html

(accessed 2 September 2025).

Kingdon JW (2011) Agendas, alternatives, and public policies (Updated. *Glenview, IL: Pearson* 128: 251–257.

Kingdon JW (2014) *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies. Second Edition.* Pearson Education Limited.

Klonick K (2017) The new governors: The people, rules, and processes governing online speech. *Harv. L. Rev.* 131. HeinOnline: 1598.

Krasner SD (1999b) *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kreiss D and Mcgregor SC (2018) Technology Firms Shape Political Communication: The Work of Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, and Google With Campaigns During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Cycle. *Political Communication* 35(2): 155–177.

Li J and Tang Y (2010) CEO Hubris and Firm Risk Taking in China: The Moderating Role of Managerial Discretion. *Academy of Management Journal* 53(1): 45–68.

Mann M (2012) *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1, a History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760*. Cambridge University Press.

March JG and Olsen JP (1983) The new institutionalism: Organizational factors in political life. *American Political Science Review* 78(3). Cambridge University Press: 734–749.

Mayer M and Nock PJ (2025) Digital fragmentations, technological sovereignty and new perspectives on the global digital political economy. *Global political economy* 4(1). Bristol University Press: 2–13.

Metz C, Vinograd C and Cooper H (2022) Elon Musk Foments More Geopolitical Controversy With Ukraine Internet Dispute. *The New York Times*, 14 October. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/14/technology/elon-musk-ukraine-internet.html (accessed 2 September 2025).

Mills CW (2019) The Power Elite. In: *Social Stratification, Class, Race, and Gender in Sociological Perspective, Second Edition*. Routledge, pp. 202–211.

Murphy HT (2023) Sam Altman Charmed Congress. But He Made a Slip-Up. *Slate*, 17 May. Available at: https://slate.com/technology/2023/05/sam-altman-openai-hearing-senate-chatgpt-frivolous-lawsuit.html (accessed 2 September 2025).

Patrick SM (2017) *The Sovereignty Wars: Reconciling America with the World*. Brookings Institution Press.

Perrigo B (2023) Lawmakers Aren't Giving Sam Altman the Zuckerberg Treatment (Yet). Available at: https://time.com/6280867/sam-altman-senate-hearing-zuckerberg/ (accessed 7 October 2025).

Rachman G (2024) Elon Musk is an unguided geopolitical missile. *Financial Times*, 2 September. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/b384c68c-a8b8-42ea-8786-337d962c2e96 (accessed 2 September 2025).

Ruggie JG (1993) Territoriality and beyond: problematizing modernity in international relations.

International organization 47(1). Cambridge University Press: 139–174.

Shackelford SJ (2014) *Managing Cyber Attacks in International Law, Business, and Relations: In Search of Cyber Peace*. Cambridge University Press.

Sheetz M (2022) Ukraine official: 150,000 using SpaceX's Starlink in daily average. *CNBC*, 2 May. Available at: https://www.cnbc.com/2022/05/02/ukraine-official-150000-using-spacexs-starlink-daily.html (accessed 7 October 2025).

Shiffman J (2010) Issue attention in global health: the case of newborn survival. *The Lancet* 375(9730). Elsevier: 2045–2049.

Siddiqi S, Masud TI, Nishtar S, et al. (2009) Framework for assessing governance of the health system in developing countries: gateway to good governance. *Health Policy* 90(1). Elsevier: 13–25.

Sorkin AR, Mattu R, Warner B, et al. (2023) Washington Confronts the Challenge of Policing A.I. *The New York Times*, 17 May. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/17/business/openai-altman-congress-ai-regulation.html (accessed 7 October 2025).

Srivastava S (2022) *Hybrid Sovereignty in World Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Strange S (1996) *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy*. Cambridge university press.

Taylor J and AAP (2024) Facebook shuts news tab after Meta vows to stop paying Australian publishers for content. *The Guardian*, 1 April. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/apr/02/facebook-shuts-news-tab-after-meta-vows-to-stop-paying-australian-publishers-for-content (accessed 7 October 2025).

Toh M (2021) Analysis: How Facebook managed to 'unfriend' Australia while Google came out on top. Available at: https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/18/tech/google-facebook-australia-media-bargaining-intl-hnk (accessed 7 October 2025).

Tucker E, Alonso M and Wattles J (2022) SpaceX Starlink user terminals arrive in Ukraine, officials says. *CNN Business*, 28 February. Available at: https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/27/business/starlink-activated-ukraine (accessed 7 October 2025).

Useem M (1986) *The Inner Circle: Large Corporations and the Rise of Business Political Activity in the US and UK*. Oxford University Press.

Van Dijck J, Poell T and De Waal M (2018b) *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. Oxford University Press.

Vanian J (2024) Facebook is getting rid of the News tab in the U.S. and Australia. Available at: https://www.cnbc.com/2024/03/01/facebook-is-getting-rid-of-the-news-tab-in-the-us-and-australia.html (accessed 7 October 2025).

Vincent J (2023) OpenAI's CEO is on a world tour, trying to stay ahead of global regulators. Available at: https://www.cnbc.com/video/2023/06/06/openais-ceo-is-on-a-world-tour-trying-to-stay-ahead-of-global-regulators.html (accessed 7 October 2025).

Vogel SK (2018) *Freer Markets, More Rules: Regulatory Reform in Advanced Industrial Countries*. Cornell University Press.

Waltz KN (2010) *Theory of International Politics*. Waveland Press.

West D (2023) Senate hearing highlights AI harms and need for tougher regulation. In: *Brookings*. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/senate-hearing-highlights-ai-harms-and-need-for-tougher-regulation/ (accessed 7 October 2025).

Wu T (2011) *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires*. Vintage.

Zahariadis N (2019) The multiple streams framework: Structure, limitations, prospects. In: *Theories of the Policy Process, Second Edition*. Routledge, pp. 65–92.

Zorthian J (2023) OpenAI CEO Sam Altman Agrees AI Must Be Regulated | TIME. *TIME*, 16 May. Available at: https://time.com/6280372/sam-altman-chatgpt-regulate-ai/ (accessed 7 October 2025).

Zuboff S (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs.