

**PAWNS, POWERS, AND PRINCIPALITIES**

*Secret Networks, Global Power, and the Biblical End-Time Conflict*

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**PART VI**

THE MODERN SYSTEM: GOVERNANCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND INFORMATION

**CHAPTER 16**

**THE INFORMATION  
BATTLEFIELD:  
WHO DEFINES REALITY?**

*Media Gatekeeping, Algorithmic Visibility, Censorship, Synthetic Content,  
and Christian Discernment in the Age of Platform Power*

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## ABSTRACT

The decisive information struggle of the digital age is not confined to the question of whether a statement is allowed to exist. Power also operates through attention, selection, ranking, recommendation, labeling, context, credibility signals, search visibility, monetization, and the architecture by which people encounter claims at all. This chapter examines that wider field of epistemic power. It traces the historical movement from scarce print channels and concentrated broadcasting to a platform society in which publishers, search engines, social networks, cloud systems, recommender algorithms, fact-checking organizations, governments, regulators, artificial-intelligence systems, advertisers, and users jointly shape the practical conditions under which public reality is perceived.

The evidence supports several strong conclusions. Media organizations and platforms inevitably gatekeep because attention is scarce. Agenda-setting, framing, ranking, and recommendation can materially alter what people see and what receives public salience. Major platforms have openly reduced distribution of content they classify as borderline or harmful while elevating sources they regard as authoritative. Governments have communicated extensively with platforms about misinformation, and the record in *Murthy v. Missouri* shows that federal actors played a role in at least some moderation choices, although the United States Supreme Court did not decide the constitutional merits because the plaintiffs failed to establish Article III standing. The European Union has meanwhile moved toward auditable transparency duties for content moderation, recommender systems, and AI-generated content. Generative AI adds a new layer because search and conversational systems increasingly synthesize answers rather than merely list sources, while deepfakes and synthetic media can imitate human speech and documentary evidence at scale.

These findings do not establish that one hidden committee centrally controls the global information environment. Experimental research also cautions against treating algorithms as mind-control devices: changes in feeds can strongly alter exposure and platform use without necessarily producing detectable short-term changes in polarization or political attitudes. Fact-checking can improve accuracy judgments, yet fact-checkers remain human institutions whose methods, scope, funding, correction procedures, and authority require scrutiny. The opposite error is equally dangerous. Assuming every official statement is false merely replaces one outsourced authority with another.

Biblically, the information battlefield is first a battle over truth, testimony, worship, and allegiance. Scripture warns that deceivers may themselves be deceived, that people may gather teachers to suit their desires, and that spiritual deception can operate through teaching. Yet Scripture also forbids panic, slander, and indiscriminate suspicion. Christian discernment therefore joins *Sola Scriptura* with intellectual humility, primary evidence, corroboration, repentance, holiness, and love of neighbor. The Church is called neither to trust institutions blindly nor to romanticize forbidden knowledge. Its final confidence is Jesus Christ, who is the truth, whose Word judges every human narrative, and whose return is the believer's Blessed Hope.

**Keywords:** information power; agenda-setting; framing; media ownership; platform governance; content moderation; censorship; algorithmic ranking; recommender systems; fact-checking; misinformation; disinformation; malinformation; search engines; generative AI; deepfakes; synthetic media; government-platform coordination; Digital Services Act; Christian epistemology; spiritual warfare

## RESEARCH NOTE

This chapter gives priority to platform policies, court opinions, statutory and regulatory texts, official transparency materials, current technical standards, authenticated institutional publications, and peer-reviewed research. Contemporary material was rechecked through 16 August 2026. Chapter 12 gave the book's principal historical treatment of philanthropy, public relations, behavioral science, Walter Lippmann, Edward Bernays, and the engineering of consent. Chapter 13 gave the principal treatment of covert propaganda and intelligence operations. Chapter 15 examined global governance, digital identity, artificial-intelligence governance, and interoperable infrastructure. Those histories are not repeated here. The present chapter owns the epistemic question: how institutions classify information, distribute attention, construct credibility, moderate speech, rank visibility, and mediate public knowledge.

The book-wide evidentiary labels remain fixed: **ESTABLISHED, STRONGLY SUPPORTED, PLAUSIBLE, CONTESTED, WEAKLY SUPPORTED, and UNSUPPORTED**. Terminology is also used with legal and institutional care. In this chapter, *censorship* is reserved principally for governmental prohibition, coercive state action, or other speech restraints for which the evidence justifies that term; *moderation*, *curation*, *demotion*, *deplatforming*, and *ranking* describe private or platform governance unless a state-action mechanism is separately established. A platform's ability to demote content is not proof that it secretly authored the content. Government communication with a platform is not automatically unconstitutional coercion. A fact-checking error does not prove that all fact-checking is fraudulent. A documented censorship episode does not prove that every unpopular claim is true. Conversely, the absence of a formal ban does not mean that visibility is neutral. Power can operate through ranking and distribution long before it operates through prohibition.

PART VI | THE MODERN SYSTEM: GOVERNANCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND INFORMATION  
CHAPTER 16

# THE INFORMATION BATTLEFIELD: WHO DEFINES REALITY?

*Media Gatekeeping, Algorithmic Visibility, Censorship, Synthetic Content, and Christian Discernment in the Age of Platform Power*

“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.” ([John 17:17](#), CSB)

## I. The Question Beneath the Headlines: Who Gets to Define What Is Real?

Chapter 15 ended with a political problem that cannot be solved by examining constitutions alone. A society may preserve formal freedom of speech while allowing a relatively small number of institutions to shape which speech is found, recommended, believed, funded, amplified, or professionally recognized. The central issue is not merely who may speak. It is who structures the field in which speech becomes socially consequential.

That field may be called the information environment. It includes newspapers, broadcasters, search engines, social networks, academic journals, government communications, press agencies, advertisers, fact-checkers, intelligence services, public-relations firms, libraries, schools, churches, creators, influencers, and now generative artificial-intelligence systems. Each performs different functions, but all can affect the route between an event and a citizen’s understanding of that event. Most people do not witness wars, clinical trials, cabinet meetings, intelligence operations, distant elections, monetary-policy deliberations, or scientific controversies firsthand. They know them through testimony and mediation.

This unavoidable dependence on mediation creates what may be called epistemic power: the capacity to affect what others can know, notice, verify, or treat as credible. Epistemic power is not automatically abusive. Editors must choose stories. Search engines must rank results. Libraries must catalogue. Scientific journals must assess manuscripts. Churches must decide what is taught from their pulpits. Platforms must act against fraud, child exploitation, threats, impersonation, and other harmful conduct. The moral question is not whether selection occurs. Selection is inevitable. The questions are who selects, by what criteria, with what transparency, under whose authority, with what opportunities for appeal, and with what consequences when the selector is wrong.

This distinction matters because censorship is only one possible mechanism. A government can prohibit a book. A broadcaster can decline to invite a guest. A platform can delete a post. But a platform can also leave content technically available while reducing its recommendations. A search engine can index a page but rank it so low that few users encounter it. An advertiser can demonetize a creator. A payment provider can make publication commercially difficult. A fact-check label can discourage sharing. A recommendation system can repeatedly elevate one framing while rarely surfacing another. An AI assistant can answer a question by synthesizing a narrow set of sources, so that some users may never inspect the underlying documents.

The strongest version of information control therefore does not require a Ministry of Truth issuing daily directives. It can emerge from overlapping decisions by institutions with different motives: safety, reputation, ideology, law, profit, advertiser preference, professional norms, user engagement, national security, public health,

liability, or genuine concern for accuracy. Those motives may conflict. They may also converge. The Christian investigator must distinguish convergence from command while refusing to pretend that convergence is politically unimportant.

Scripture gives the Church a category deeper than institutional sociology. Truth is not whatever acquires the largest distribution channel. Jesus prays, “your word is truth” ([John 17:17](#)), and identifies Himself as “the way, the truth, and the life” ([John 14:6](#)). This does not relieve Christians of ordinary historical investigation. It establishes the hierarchy of authority. Human institutions can certify, suppress, misclassify, correct, retract, or reverse themselves. God does not become true by institutional endorsement.

## 2. From Scarce Channels to Platform Abundance

The history of information power is partly a history of scarcity. Before mass literacy and industrial printing, manuscripts and books were expensive, distribution was slow, and political or ecclesiastical authorities could exercise influence through licensing, censorship, patronage, and control of presses. The printing revolution lowered the cost of copying ideas and disrupted older gatekeepers, but it did not abolish gatekeeping. Printers decided what to risk publishing. Governments prosecuted sedition. Churches maintained indexes and doctrinal boundaries. Markets rewarded some texts and ignored others.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries created a different form of concentration. Industrial presses, wire services, radio networks, cinema, and television could reach millions, but entry costs were high and broadcast spectrum was limited. A modest number of publishers, editors, network executives, regulators, advertisers, and owners consequently occupied crucial positions between events and mass publics. Chapter 12 examined the parallel rise of professional propaganda and public relations. The present point is narrower: industrial media made the selection of attention an institutional function.

Digital networks appeared to dissolve that bottleneck. Anyone with an internet connection could publish to a global audience without buying a printing press or television station. Blogs challenged newspapers. Social media bypassed editors. Video platforms bypassed broadcasters. Search engines made obscure documents discoverable. This was a genuine expansion of communicative freedom.

Yet abundance created a new scarcity: attention. When billions of pages, posts, images, and videos compete for finite human time, discovery becomes the decisive gateway. The gatekeeper did not disappear. It changed form. The printing press had an editor. The platform has policies, recommender systems, ranking models, trust-and-safety teams, advertisers, app-store rules, hosting providers, and automated classifiers. The user can publish more easily than ever, but publication is no longer the same as visibility.

This is why the platform society cannot be described adequately by the language of “free speech” versus “censorship” alone. Platforms make continuous allocation decisions. They decide which posts enter a feed, which videos are placed beside another video, which results answer a query, which comments are collapsed, which trends are highlighted, which accounts receive warnings, and which sources are treated as authoritative. Even if no employee harbors a political intention, those design choices distribute social power.

The shift also complicates accountability. A newspaper editor is an identifiable professional within a publication. A recommender system can incorporate thousands of signals and change constantly through machine learning, experimentation, and policy updates. Users can experience large changes in what they see without knowing which

signal changed. The practical governor of attention is therefore partly institutional and partly computational.

### 3. Media Ownership, Funding, and the Power of Agenda-Setting

Ownership matters, but it matters in more complex ways than the slogan “who owns the media controls the media” suggests. Owners can appoint executives, set investment horizons, approve acquisitions, define corporate strategy, and influence risk tolerance. Yet professional norms, newsroom cultures, labor relations, audience expectations, regulation, advertiser incentives, and individual journalists also affect output. Different ownership structures produce different combinations of autonomy and constraint. Comparative scholarship on media ownership shows that state, private, nonprofit, and family ownership forms create distinct vulnerabilities to political and economic instrumentalization rather than one universal pattern (Benson et al., 2024).

The classic concept of agenda-setting helps clarify the mechanism. McCombs and Shaw's 1972 study did not argue that mass media can simply implant any belief into a passive audience. It examined the relationship between the issues emphasized in media coverage and the issues voters regarded as important. The lasting insight is that power can operate by influencing what receives sustained public attention, not merely by dictating what conclusion people must reach (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Agenda-setting is therefore upstream from persuasion. If a subject receives repeated headlines, expert panels, documentaries, official reports, and political speeches, citizens are more likely to regard it as important. If another subject receives little coverage, it may remain politically marginal even when its underlying facts are serious. This does not require editors to gather in a room and coordinate. News values, institutional routines, common sources, elite statements, legal risk, staffing constraints, ideological priors, and market incentives can independently produce similar agendas.

Funding introduces another layer. Chapter 12 documented how foundations and donors can support journalism, research, and fact-checking while formally preserving editorial independence. The relevant conclusion for this chapter is neither that funding proves control nor that funding is irrelevant. Financial support can determine which desks exist, which regions receive correspondents, which investigative projects can survive, and which subject areas acquire durable professional capacity. A donor need not dictate a sentence to change the distribution of attention.

The same principle applies to advertising and subscription markets. A news organization dependent on advertisers may avoid material that threatens commercial relationships, but it may also protect editorial firewalls precisely to preserve credibility. A subscription-driven outlet may become less dependent on advertisers while becoming more responsive to the ideological preferences of a paying niche. A state-funded broadcaster may possess strong legal protections for editorial independence and still face political pressure. No ownership model is morally self-authenticating.

The evidentiary verdict is therefore **STRONGLY SUPPORTED**: ownership and funding structures can influence agendas, institutional incentives, and the range of sustainable journalism. The stronger claim that ownership alone proves line-by-line editorial command is **UNSUPPORTED** without specific evidence of instruction, intervention, suppression, or conditioned financing. The Christian obligation is to investigate the mechanism rather than infer obedience from a balance sheet.

## 4. Gatekeeping, Framing, Omission, Repetition, and Authority Signals

Agenda-setting concerns salience. Framing concerns interpretation. Robert Entman's influential formulation described framing as selecting aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in communication in ways that help define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, or suggest remedies (Entman, 1993). The principle is easy to see in ordinary reporting. The same protest can be framed primarily as a public-order problem, a civil-rights movement, an economic grievance, a foreign-influence operation, or a generational revolt. Each frame may include true facts while organizing them around a different causal story.

This is one reason factual accuracy at the sentence level does not settle the whole question of narrative power. A report can contain no literal falsehood and still mislead by omission, disproportion, suggestive sequencing, decontextualized statistics, selective expert choice, or asymmetrical skepticism. Conversely, a critic can accuse a report of “framing” merely because it does not adopt the critic's preferred moral vocabulary. Framing analysis is not a magical device for proving bias. It is a disciplined way of asking what has been made salient and what interpretive work that salience performs.

Omission is especially difficult to evaluate because every communication omits almost everything. A five-minute report cannot reproduce a complete archive. Responsible criticism therefore asks whether the omitted material is relevant enough that its absence materially changes the reader's understanding, whether the institution had access to it, whether comparable cases receive different treatment, and whether correction follows when new evidence appears.

Repetition adds another effect. Claims repeatedly encountered from multiple apparently independent channels may acquire what feels like corroboration even when the channels rely on the same original source. This is the public-information analogue of circular citation in scholarship. A government briefing is reported by a wire service, repeated by television networks, summarized by influencers, indexed by search engines, and then quoted in AI-generated answers. The citizen may experience twenty repetitions as twenty confirmations when the evidentiary root is one statement.

Authority signals are equally consequential. Labels such as “expert,” “official,” “peer-reviewed,” “state-affiliated,” “fact-checked,” “community note,” “highly cited,” or “trusted source” compress a complex credibility judgment into a symbol. Such signals can help people navigate overload. No citizen can reproduce every laboratory experiment or inspect every classified file. The danger appears when the signal becomes a substitute for inspection or when institutional prestige is treated as immunity from error.

The problem is not solved by rejecting authority altogether. Testimony is unavoidable. A healthy epistemic order therefore requires authorities that can be questioned, documents that can be inspected, methods that can be audited, conflicts that can be disclosed, dissent that can be heard, and errors that can be corrected. The authority signal should invite proportionate trust, not demand intellectual surrender.

## 5. From Publisher to Governor: Platform Rules as Private Law

Social-media companies began as communications services, but at scale they acquired quasi-governance functions. They write rules, adjudicate violations, impose penalties, maintain appeals processes, identify trusted reporters, negotiate with governments, and design systems that determine distribution. Kate Klonick aptly described major platforms as “new governors” because they regulate speech within privately controlled spaces used by enormous publics (Klonick, 2018). Tarleton Gillespie (2018) likewise

showed that content moderation is not a peripheral cleanup task but central to what platforms are.

Private governance differs from state censorship. In constitutional systems such as the United States, the First Amendment restrains government, not every private publisher. A private platform generally possesses rights of editorial judgment as well as contractual obligations to users. Yet the formal public-private distinction does not eliminate the democratic problem. When a privately owned service becomes a principal channel of political communication, changes to its rules can affect public life at a scale once associated with public institutions.

Moderation also occurs under genuine necessity. Platforms cannot plausibly refuse all intervention. Spam, malware, scams, terrorist recruitment, nonconsensual sexual imagery, child sexual-abuse material, threats, impersonation, coordinated inauthentic behavior, and industrial-scale harassment are not solved by a philosophy of absolute noninterference. Users themselves demand moderation when abuse makes participation impossible.

The difficult cases lie at the boundary between harm and contestable knowledge: public health, war, election claims, emerging science, political scandal, disputed history, hate speech, satire, and rapidly developing events. Here the cost of error is asymmetric. Leaving false information visible can cause harm. Removing truthful information can suppress correction, whistleblowing, or minority knowledge. During uncertainty, yesterday's "misinformation" can become tomorrow's revised consensus, but the opposite is also true: dramatic claims can circulate widely long before evidence catches up.

Platform governance therefore needs a rule-of-law analogue. Clear policies, notice, reason-giving, proportionate sanctions, appeal, consistency, transparency about automation, independent research access, and meaningful measurement of errors are not luxuries. They are basic safeguards whenever private rules govern public participation at scale. The demand for such safeguards is not hostility to moderation. It is recognition that the moderator is fallible and powerful at the same time.

## 6. Removal Is Only One Lever: Ranking, Demotion, and Recommendation

One of the most important developments in modern information control is the separation of availability from reach. A platform can decide that content does not violate its rules strongly enough to justify removal while also deciding that it should not be recommended widely. This distinction makes simple censorship metrics incomplete. Counting deleted posts does not reveal how much visibility was altered.

YouTube made this mechanism unusually explicit. In January 2019, the company announced that it would begin reducing recommendations of "borderline" content that came close to violating its Community Guidelines or could misinform users in harmful ways (YouTube, 2019a). By December of that year, YouTube reported that more than thirty product changes had produced a 70 percent average reduction in watch time from non-subscriber recommendations of such content in the United States, while the videos remained available if users deliberately sought them out (YouTube, 2019b). The company also described efforts to "raise" sources it classified as authoritative for subjects such as news, science, history, and vaccines.

This is not a secret program discovered through leaked correspondence. It is a public description of algorithmic editorial policy. Its significance lies in the mechanism. The platform did not merely ask whether a video was permitted. It made a second judgment about whether the video deserved algorithmic distribution. That judgment was

operationalized through evaluators, expert input, machine-learning models, and recommendation systems.

Such systems can protect users from fraud or harmful deception. They can also create what may be called invisible editorialization. A newspaper places its editorial choices on a visible page. A recommendation model can alter millions of individual information environments without producing a single public front page. The user experiences the outcome as a personalized feed rather than as an editorial decision.

The moral question is therefore wider than “Was I censored?” A speaker may remain technically free to post but become practically undiscoverable. The relevant accountability questions include the criteria for demotion, whether political or scientific judgments are embedded in classifiers, how error rates are measured, whether users are told why reach changed, and whether a meaningful appeal exists.

At the same time, reduced reach should not automatically be described as proof of political persecution. Recommendation is inherently selective. No platform can recommend every item equally. A responsible conclusion requires comparative evidence: which categories were affected, what criteria were used, how consistently they were applied, and whether internal or external communications show improper motive or pressure.

## 7. Algorithmic Visibility Is Powerful, but Algorithms Are Not Omnipotent

The existence of ranking power can tempt critics into another overstatement: if algorithms determine exposure, they must determine belief. The evidence does not support such mechanical psychology.

A major field experiment during the 2020 United States election assigned consenting Facebook and Instagram users to reverse-chronological feeds rather than the platforms’ default algorithmic feeds. The change substantially altered behavior and exposure. Users spent less time on the platforms, and the composition of what they saw changed. Yet over the three-month study period, the intervention did not significantly change several measured outcomes, including issue polarization, affective polarization, political knowledge, and other key attitudes (Guess et al., 2023).

A related study found that Facebook users received much more content from ideologically like-minded sources than from cross-cutting sources. Reducing exposure to like-minded content changed what users saw, including their exposure to political and untrustworthy sources, but did not produce detectable changes in measured political attitudes over the study period (Nyhan et al., 2023). These studies do not prove that algorithms never influence beliefs. They show that the causal chain from exposure to durable political attitude is more difficult than the language of “brainwashing” implies.

Several qualifications matter. Short-term experiments may miss cumulative effects that unfold over years. Political attitudes are often stable. Different populations may respond differently. Algorithms can affect knowledge, emotion, agenda salience, social trust, mobilization, consumption, and social norms even when a particular polarization measure does not move. Platform researchers also face unusually difficult data-access problems. No single study can settle the field.

Still, the counter-evidence is essential. **ESTABLISHED:** algorithmic systems can materially change information exposure and user behavior. **NOT ESTABLISHED:** that such systems can reliably program citizens into predetermined political beliefs. The difference protects analysis from technological mysticism.

For the Christian reader, this distinction has theological significance. Human beings are influenced but not reducible to machines. Scripture treats persons as morally responsible agents whose desires, loves, fears, loyalties, and sins shape how they receive information. James warns that desire itself can entice and give birth to sin ([James 1:14–15](#)). Manipulative systems matter, but the human heart is not innocent raw material. The information battlefield passes through institutions and through us.

## 8. Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation, and the Politics of Definition

The language used to classify false or harmful information is itself part of the information battlefield. Terms often collapse into one another in public debate, but they should not. Wardle and Derakhshan's Council of Europe framework distinguished misinformation, false information shared without an intention to cause harm; disinformation, false information knowingly created or shared to cause harm; and malinformation, genuine information used in a harmful context, such as the strategic publication of private material (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The distinctions are imperfect, but they force the analyst to separate falsity from intent and intent from harm.

That separation matters because the policy response changes with the category. An elderly user who unknowingly shares an inaccurate medical claim is not morally identical to an organized operation fabricating evidence. A journalist publishing authenticated documents in the public interest is not equivalent to an extortionist releasing private data to injure a victim, even though both may distribute true information. A satirist may utter a literal falsehood without intending deception. A government may release technically accurate facts while omitting context in order to mislead. Information ethics cannot be reduced to a binary true-or-false switch.

Definitions become politically sensitive when institutions move from describing falsehood to regulating it. Some claims are readily verifiable. A fabricated polling date, a forged quotation, or a falsely altered video can often be tested against a primary record. Other claims concern emerging science, causal interpretation, disputed policy judgments, or probabilistic forecasts. A label applied too early can freeze uncertainty into institutional orthodoxy. Conversely, refusing to label anything until every controversy disappears can allow deliberate fraud to spread during the period when correction matters most.

The phrase “misinformation” also risks becoming a rhetorical weapon when it is used to dismiss an opponent without specifying the false proposition. Responsible information governance should therefore identify the exact claim, state the evidence against it, distinguish fact from interpretation, disclose uncertainty, and provide a correction path. A vague label may produce social exclusion without supplying knowledge.

The same demand applies to alternative media. “Mainstream propaganda” is not an evidentiary category. A critic who rejects a claim must identify the document, datum, quotation, method, or contradiction that makes it unreliable. Calling an institution captured does not demonstrate capture. The book's methodology therefore treats labels from both establishment and anti-establishment actors as hypotheses requiring proof.

Theological language requires comparable restraint. [1 Timothy 4:1](#) warns of “deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons.” That text establishes the spiritual seriousness of false teaching. It does not authorize Christians to call every mistaken statistical estimate or contested scientific position demonic. The content, moral direction, evidence, and fruit must be examined. Biblical discernment becomes strongest when it refuses both euphemism about lies and careless spiritual accusation.

## 9. Fact-Checking: Necessary Correction and the Problem of Epistemic Authority

Fact-checking arose in part from a legitimate democratic need. Public figures make claims faster than ordinary citizens can verify them, false stories can spread at enormous speed, and manipulated images can acquire millions of views before corrections appear. Institutions devoted to checking public claims can therefore serve the common good by locating primary sources, reconstructing context, identifying altered media, and making evidence accessible.

The International Fact-Checking Network's Code of Principles illustrates the profession's own awareness of its vulnerability. Signatories commit to nonpartisanship and fairness, transparency about sources, funding, organization, and methodology, as well as an open corrections policy. The Code also excludes organizations whose editorial content is controlled by a state, political party, or politician from verified signatory status (International Fact-Checking Network, n.d.). These safeguards do not prove perfect neutrality. They acknowledge that credibility depends on procedures that permit outsiders to assess conflicts and corrections.

Empirical research also shows that fact-checking can work. Martel and Rand (2024) found that fact-checker warning labels improved accuracy judgments even among respondents who expressed distrust of fact-checkers. This is important counter-evidence against the claim that correction is useless. Human beings can revise judgments when confronted with credible contrary information.

Yet usefulness does not settle the authority question. A fact-checker must choose which claims to check, which wording captures the claim, which evidence counts as decisive, how uncertainty is treated, whether experts disagree, and what rating language is appropriate. The act of checking fact therefore contains judgments about scope and interpretation. The more a platform attaches distribution penalties to a fact-check rating, the more those judgments acquire governing force.

Meta's 2025 change in the United States offers a revealing institutional case. The company ended its third-party fact-checking program in the United States and began replacing it with Community Notes, a system in which notes are written and rated by contributors and are published only when people who often disagree find the note helpful. Meta stated that, unlike the former fact-check system, Community Notes would add context without automatically reducing the reach of the underlying post (Meta, 2025a, 2025b). One need not accept Meta's self-assessment of the old or new system to see the analytical significance. A major platform changed its theory of epistemic governance from expert third-party adjudication toward cross-perspective crowd annotation.

The reversal demonstrates why no moderation architecture should be treated as inevitable. Institutions revise policy because they learn, respond to politics, react to criticism, change leadership, alter business priorities, or reassess error costs. What one year is defended as necessary for information integrity may later be redesigned as overly restrictive. Such reversals are not proof that every earlier decision was corrupt. They are proof that institutional judgments are contingent and therefore require humility.

The best fact-checking culture would consequently welcome scrutiny of the checker. It would publish evidence, disclose material funding, separate factual claims from policy judgments, state uncertainty honestly, preserve an appeal or correction mechanism, and avoid attaching a moral stigma to people who make good-faith errors. Christians should value correction because truth matters, but should not treat the fact-check label as a sacrament. [Acts 17:11](#) praises the Bereans for receiving teaching eagerly while

examining the Scriptures daily to see whether the message was true. Their posture combined receptivity with verification.

## 10. Search Engines and the New Gate of AI-Mediated Answers

Search transformed the internet by making abundance usable. Its political importance follows from a simple fact: what cannot be found may function socially as though it scarcely exists. Search ranking therefore became one of the most consequential forms of information mediation in modern life.

Traditional search usually presented ranked links, snippets, images, and specialized results. The user still had to choose a source and read it. Generative AI changes that relationship. AI-assisted search can synthesize an answer before the user opens the underlying documents. This can be extraordinarily useful. It can compare sources, explain difficult material, translate, summarize, and help a novice formulate a better question. It also shifts epistemic weight toward the system that selects, synthesizes, and cites.

Google's own 2026 reporting illustrates the scale of the transition. In June 2026, the company stated that AI Overviews had more than 2.5 billion monthly active users and AI Mode had surpassed one billion monthly users. It also announced a test allowing website owners to control whether their content could appear in and help ground generative AI Search responses (Google, 2026b). These are company-reported figures, not independent measurements, but even with that qualification they indicate that AI-mediated search is no longer a marginal experiment.

In May 2026, Google extended its "Preferred Sources" feature into AI Overviews and AI Mode and introduced additional mechanisms intended to highlight original or influential reporting, including "Highly Cited" labels (Google, 2026a). Again, the relevant point is not that these features are sinister. They may help users find sources they trust and recover original reporting in an AI-summarized environment. The point is that the search provider now performs several epistemic functions at once: retrieval, ranking, synthesis, source selection, authority signaling, and presentation.

The frontier is moving from *responsive* search toward *agentic* search. At Google I/O in May 2026, the company described "information agents" intended to work in the background, monitor a user's interests, and proactively surface relevant information rather than waiting for a fresh query (Google, 2026c). The feature was presented as an emerging direction rather than a universal replacement for ordinary search. Its epistemic significance is nevertheless substantial: when a system begins deciding not only how to answer a question but also which questions or developments deserve to interrupt the user, agenda-setting can become personalized, continuous, and partly automated. That makes source transparency, user control, diversity of inputs, and the ability to inspect original evidence even more important.

This changes the meaning of gatekeeping. The old question was, "Which link appears first?" The new question is also, "Which sources were used to construct the answer, which were omitted, how were conflicts resolved, how visible are citations, and will users click through far enough to inspect the evidence?" The more fluent the generated answer, the greater the risk that rhetorical coherence will be mistaken for verification.

The National Institute of Standards and Technology's Generative AI Profile identifies risks that include confidently generated falsehoods, fabricated or unreliable content, and synthetic material capable of misleading users (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2024). These are not arguments against generative AI. They are reminders that fluency is not truth. An AI system can state an error in calm

academic prose. It can also correctly challenge a false consensus. The user still bears responsibility to inspect sources when the stakes are high.

For Christian readers, the arrival of AI-mediated search intensifies an old discipline. “Test all things. Hold on to what is good” (1 [Thessalonians 5:21](#)) applies to human teachers, institutions, and machine-generated summaries alike. Scripture is not teaching a theory of algorithms. It is commanding a posture that refuses passive epistemic dependence.

## II. Synthetic Consensus: Generative AI, Deepfakes, Bots, and Automated Persuasion

The information environment is changing not only because machines rank human speech but because machines can now produce speech, images, audio, and video at enormous scale. This creates a qualitatively different problem. Industrial propaganda once required writers, printers, broadcasters, actors, or production teams. Generative systems can produce thousands of tailored messages, synthetic personas, translated narratives, realistic voices, or persuasive images at very low marginal cost.

A deepfake is synthetic or manipulated media that convincingly represents a person as saying or doing something that did not occur in the depicted way. The category includes more than political spectacle. Voice cloning can impersonate relatives, executives, candidates, pastors, or public officials. Synthetic images can create apparent evidence of events that never happened. Automated accounts can simulate grassroots enthusiasm, outrage, or consensus. Language models can generate comments that appear independent while being centrally prompted.

This capacity makes authenticity a first-order political issue. In February 2024, the United States Federal Communications Commission held that AI-generated voices fall within the Telephone Consumer Protection Act’s restrictions on artificial or prerecorded voices, a response driven in part by the risks of voice cloning and deceptive robocalls (Federal Communications Commission, 2024). In Europe, Article 50 transparency obligations under the Artificial Intelligence Act became applicable on 2 August 2026. European Commission guidance states that providers must inform people when they interact directly with certain AI systems and must support machine-readable marking of AI-generated or manipulated content in relevant circumstances, while deployers have disclosure duties for deepfakes and certain AI-generated public-interest text (European Commission, 2026b, 2026c; European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024). The Commission also notes a transition period until December 2026 for the marking obligation on certain generative systems placed on the market before 2 August 2026. That implementation nuance matters because legal applicability and full technical deployment are not always identical dates.

Technical provenance initiatives address part of the same problem. The Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity’s current C2PA specification describes Content Credentials as cryptographically verifiable provenance data that can record aspects of a digital asset’s origin and editing history (Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity, 2026). C2PA itself cautions against treating provenance as a universal truth oracle: the absence of Content Credentials does not by itself prove that an asset is untrustworthy. The distinction is crucial. A genuine photograph can be misleadingly captioned. An authentic government video can contain propaganda. An unsigned image can still be real. A signed synthetic image can be transparently fictional. Authentication narrows the question of provenance without settling the truth of every claim made with the media.

The deeper danger is synthetic consensus. Human beings use social proof to judge plausibility. If a claim appears to be repeated by thousands of ordinary people, the

repetition itself can influence perception. Generative systems make it cheaper to manufacture that appearance. The mechanism does not require viewers to believe every fake account. It can work by altering the perceived boundaries of acceptable opinion, creating the impression that “everyone knows” something, overwhelming moderation systems, or exhausting citizens until they no longer believe authentic evidence.

This last possibility deserves special attention. A world saturated with deepfakes may not simply become a world in which people believe false videos. It can become a world in which wrongdoers dismiss genuine recordings as synthetic. Scholars sometimes call this the liar’s dividend: the existence of convincing falsification weakens the evidentiary force of authentic media because denial becomes easier (Chesney & Citron, 2019). The information battlefield then moves from deception by fabrication to deception by universal doubt.

Christian discernment cannot survive by retreating into a fantasy that visual evidence is self-authenticating. Nor can it survive by deciding that nothing is knowable. The biblical faith is built on testimony, public events, named witnesses, documents, communal memory, and claims that invite examination. Luke explains that he investigated matters carefully (Luke 1:1–4); Paul grounds the resurrection proclamation in witnesses, some still living when he wrote (1 Corinthians 15:3–8). Christianity is not a religion of credulity. It treats truthful testimony as a moral good.

## 12. Government-Platform Coordination: What *Murthy v. Missouri* Actually Establishes

Few contemporary subjects have generated more heat than government communication with social-media companies. The issue must be divided carefully because several distinct activities can occur under the same label. Governments may report criminal content, warn of foreign influence, provide public-health information, request preservation of evidence, share cybersecurity indicators, flag factual errors, criticize company policies, or pressure a platform to suppress lawful speech. Some forms are ordinary government communication. Others can raise grave constitutional concerns.

The United States Supreme Court’s 2024 decision in *Murthy v. Missouri* provides an unusually rich documentary record, but it is frequently overstated by both sides. The case arose after federal officials and agencies communicated with platforms about COVID-19 and election-related misinformation. The Supreme Court’s syllabus records extensive contact: White House officials urged platforms to do more about vaccine misinformation; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shared trends and example posts; and the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency communicated with platforms about election-related misinformation (*Murthy v. Missouri*, 2024).

The lower courts treated portions of this conduct as likely coercion or significant encouragement, but the Supreme Court reversed on standing. The majority held that neither the state nor individual plaintiffs had established the Article III standing necessary to obtain forward-looking injunctive relief. Critically, the Court did not hold that all government-platform communications were constitutionally proper. It did not reach the merits in the way many public summaries imply.

The Court’s description of causation is especially important for this book. It acknowledged that the record reflected a governmental role in at least some platform moderation choices. At the same time, it emphasized that platforms had independent incentives to moderate content and frequently exercised their own judgment. The majority criticized the lower court for treating governments, platforms, and plaintiffs

as unified wholes rather than tracing particular defendants, particular communications, particular platform actions, and particular injuries (*Murthy v. Missouri*, 2024).

That reasoning mirrors the evidentiary method established in Chapter 2. “Government talked to platform” is a documented relationship, not automatically a documented command. “Platform removed content after contact” can strengthen an inference, but timing alone may not prove causation if the platform already had an independent policy. A robust case requires discriminating evidence: the wording of the request, threats or inducements, the platform’s internal response, departure from ordinary rules, subsequent action, and whether the action would likely have occurred without the governmental intervention.

The strongest evidence verdict is therefore layered. **ESTABLISHED:** federal officials communicated extensively with major platforms about content moderation and misinformation. **ESTABLISHED:** government defendants played a role in at least some moderation choices, according to the Supreme Court’s account of the record. **ESTABLISHED:** platforms also possessed independent incentives and often exercised independent judgment. **NOT ESTABLISHED BY THE SUPREME COURT’S JUDGMENT:** that the federal government operated a comprehensive unconstitutional censorship regime. The Court resolved the case on standing and left the merits unresolved.

This conclusion will satisfy neither maximalist narrative. It does not permit the officialist claim that meaningful government involvement never occurred. It also does not permit the claim that every moderation decision during the period was federal censorship. The record is more complicated, and therefore more useful. It proves that state-platform interaction is a real governance mechanism that must be examined case by case.

### 13. Regulation, Transparency, and the European Model

The European Union has approached platform governance differently from the United States. The Digital Services Act (DSA) creates a regulatory framework that includes duties concerning risk assessment, transparency, researcher access, advertising, recommender systems, and content-moderation reporting for covered services (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022). The aim is not simply to order deletion of disputed claims. A substantial part of the framework seeks to make platform governance more inspectable.

The European Commission’s harmonized reporting rules require intermediary services to provide comparable information on moderation practices. Depending on the service category, reports include removals, account actions, content-moderation personnel, and information about the accuracy of automated systems. Very large online platforms and very large online search engines face additional transparency obligations. The DSA framework also provides for more detail on recommender-system parameters, researcher access, advertising, and statements of reasons for content restrictions (European Commission, 2026a).

These provisions address a real accountability deficit. A platform that can change visibility for hundreds of millions of people should not be a complete black box. Standardized reporting can make it easier to compare error rates, enforcement volumes, automation, appeals, and regional practices. Researcher access can permit independent evaluation rather than requiring the public to accept a company’s own claims about its systems.

The United Nations’ 2024 Global Principles for Information Integrity places comparable emphasis on independent and pluralistic media, healthy incentives, public empowerment, transparency, and research. Significantly, the document also frames

excessive concentration of control over global information flows as a problem and links information-integrity policy to human rights and pluralism (United Nations, 2024). This is worth noting because the current policy landscape is not reducible to a single impulse toward censorship. Some official frameworks expressly recognize that concentrated gatekeeping itself can threaten a healthy information order.

The European approach also creates legitimate civil-liberties questions. Regulators may define systemic risk broadly. Platforms operating under large potential penalties can over-remove lawful speech to reduce compliance risk. Government pressure can migrate from direct commands into expectations about “risk mitigation.” A code described as voluntary may acquire practical force when it becomes a benchmark within a regulatory regime. The danger is not merely explicit censorship. It is regulatory over-compliance in which private companies suppress lawful speech because the safest legal strategy is to remove first and argue later.

The evolution of the EU’s disinformation code illustrates the hybrid model. The Code began as self-regulation and was strengthened in 2022. In February 2025, the European Commission and the European Board for Digital Services endorsed its integration into the DSA framework as a Code of Conduct on Disinformation. The Commission describes measures concerning demonetization, political-ad transparency, manipulative behavior, user tools, fact-checking coverage, researcher access, and monitoring (European Commission, 2025a, 2025b). The framework is therefore neither a simple speech ban nor merely private self-regulation. It is co-regulatory governance.

A Christian analysis should refuse two easy responses. It is wrong to pretend that transparency, fraud prevention, child protection, or foreign-interference safeguards are inherently tyrannical. It is also wrong to assume that benevolent regulatory language removes the need for due process, viewpoint neutrality, proportionality, appeal, and protection for lawful dissent. [Romans 13:1–7](#) affirms legitimate public authority, while Acts records occasions when apostles refused unlawful commands that contradicted obedience to God ([Acts 5:29](#)). The Christian political ethic is neither anarchic nor servile.

## 14. Narrative Management in Crises: War, Elections, Pandemics, and Social Upheaval

Crisis compresses the time available for verification. During war, the battlefield may be inaccessible. During an epidemic, evidence can change rapidly. During an election, false procedural claims can affect behavior before corrections arrive. During civil disorder, video clips can circulate without reliable time, location, or context. These conditions make crisis communication necessary and make narrative manipulation easier.

Governments have legitimate reasons to communicate quickly in emergencies. Citizens need evacuation routes, casualty information, health guidance, voting procedures, and security warnings. Yet urgency also weakens ordinary checking. Journalists rely more heavily on official briefings. Platforms may build emergency escalation channels. Experts must advise before all uncertainties are resolved. Political leaders may exploit fear. Adversaries conduct propaganda. Citizens share rumors because ambiguity is psychologically intolerable.

The historical record from Chapter 13 established that states have engaged in covert propaganda and information operations. That precedent is relevant but must not be universalized. A government press conference is not covert action merely because it advances the government’s interpretation. A false battlefield claim is not necessarily a centrally planned psychological operation. A public-health error is not proof of intentional deception. The mechanism must be shown.

Preparedness exercises provide a useful test of the same discipline. Event 201, held in October 2019 by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in partnership with the World Economic Forum and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, was a tabletop exercise built around a fictional pandemic scenario. Its materials included communications challenges, rumor control, public-private coordination, and the information problems that accompany a severe outbreak (Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, 2019). The earlier SPARS scenario likewise used a fictional coronavirus pandemic to train risk communicators on changing guidance, misinformation, public distrust, and vaccine communication (Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, 2017).

These exercises are relevant evidence of institutional anticipation. They show that experts expected future health crises to involve intense narrative and communication problems. They are **not evidence that the organizers caused, possessed prior knowledge of, or secretly scripted a particular later pandemic**. Scenario planning works precisely by imagining plausible future conditions before they occur. To convert resemblance into causation would violate the book's methodological rules.

Yet dismissing such exercises as meaningless would be equally mistaken. Prepared scenarios shape institutional readiness. They can influence who has relationships before a crisis, which communication strategies are available, which risks are prioritized, and how leaders conceptualize public compliance. The correct historical question is not "Did the exercise predict the future?" but "Which ideas, networks, assumptions, and plans moved from exercise into later policy, and can that movement be documented?"

Elections present parallel pressures. Platforms may remove false information about polling procedures while permitting broad claims about candidates and policy. YouTube's current election-misinformation policies, for example, prohibit certain content intended to mislead voters about time, place, means, or eligibility, as well as certain manipulated content posing serious risk, while preserving exceptions for educational, documentary, scientific, artistic, and public-interest contexts (YouTube, n.d.). The existence of such rules is **ESTABLISHED**. Whether a particular enforcement action is justified requires analysis of the actual content, policy, context, and process.

The recurring danger in crises is binary thinking. Citizens may be told that they must choose between trusting authorities completely and rejecting them completely. Scripture permits neither. [Proverbs 14:15](#) says that the inexperienced believe anything, while the sensible watch their steps. Prudence means neither paralysis nor gullibility. It means proportioning confidence to evidence while circumstances remain incomplete.

## 15. Investigative Literature: What the Critics Saw and Where the Evidence Stops

Long before algorithmic ranking, investigative writers argued that control over information was central to political power. William Guy Carr, Gary Allen, W. Cleon Skousen, John Coleman, Antony Sutton, and related writers directed readers toward media concentration, foundations, education, financial influence, elite networks, propaganda, and the management of public opinion. Their underlying intuition, that narrative power deserves investigation, is not difficult to defend. The documentary and scholarly record examined in this chapter independently establishes multiple mechanisms through which institutions can shape attention, visibility, credibility, and access.

The difficulty begins when evidence for a mechanism is silently converted into evidence for an apex controller. Carr (1955, pp. 518–520, 536–538), for example, treated press campaigns as instruments of political manipulation and then incorporated those campaigns into a much wider theory of hidden financial direction. The two propositions require different evidence. A coordinated press campaign can be tested

against contemporaneous coverage, ownership records, editorial correspondence, government files, or public-relations material. The further claim that a concealed hierarchy ordered the campaign requires evidence of instruction, financing, communication, or command. It cannot be supplied merely by the campaign's existence.

The same distinction governs later establishment literature. Sutton (2002) interpreted educational and information institutions through his theory of "The Order," while Coleman (1992) advanced the still broader claim that major broadcast networks, polling, research bodies, and other institutions operated under a unitary Committee-of-300 command. Allen and Abraham (1971) and Skousen (1970) popularized related models of an establishment operating through finance, policy networks, and institutional influence. Earlier chapters tested the strongest command claims in this literature and did not find a sufficient reproducible record establishing one continuous hierarchy governing the entire modern system. That conclusion is not a judgment on every lead these authors supplied. It is an evidentiary limit on the scope of what their materials can responsibly prove.

The binding rule from Chapter 11 therefore remains decisive. When an investigative writer identifies a recoverable document, institution, funding stream, membership record, policy, meeting, or transaction, the underlying evidence should be checked and can stand on its own if authenticated. When a claim depends on an unnamed hierarchy, unverifiable intelligence access, an untraceable instruction, or association treated as command, confidence must fall accordingly. Repetition across several exposés does not create independent corroboration when the authors are recycling the same allegation.

The modern platform record strengthens rather than weakens this restraint. One does not need an occult council to demonstrate that recommendation systems can reduce reach: YouTube publicly described such policies. One does not need to invent a hidden Ministry of Truth to demonstrate government-platform communication: *Murthy v. Missouri* contains an extensive judicial record. One does not need a leaked global plan to establish that European law imposes transparency and risk-governance duties on large platforms: the regulatory texts are public. One does not need speculation to show that generative AI can fabricate persuasive evidence: technical standards and public regulators expressly recognize the risk.

Documented mechanisms are more powerful than speculative totality because they can be audited. They identify actors, policies, dates, incentives, communications, and consequences. They also preserve moral responsibility. A platform executive cannot excuse an unjust policy by saying the algorithm decided it. A government official cannot hide behind a private company's terms of service if public pressure crosses lawful boundaries. An alternative commentator cannot excuse a fabricated claim by saying institutional actors have lied before. Every actor remains responsible for truth.

This chapter therefore retains the investigative tradition's strongest question while rejecting its weakest shortcut. The question is: who possesses the capacity to define practical reality, by what mechanism, under what authority, and with what result? The shortcut is to treat every similarity of narrative, overlap of personnel, or convergence of incentives as proof of one hidden author. A Christian investigation devoted to exposing deception must itself become unusually difficult to deceive.

## 16. How Narrative Control Actually Works

After stripping away both denial and exaggeration, a clearer picture emerges. Narrative control is best understood not as one technique but as a chain of possible interventions between an event, the evidence it leaves, the institutions that interpret it, the systems that distribute those interpretations, and the memory that later remains. At each stage,

power can be exercised legitimately or abused. The analytical task is to identify the stage, the actor, the mechanism, and the measurable consequence.

Upstream power begins with **production and access**. Institutions decide which research projects, reporting desks, documentary teams, archives, experts, and technical tools receive money and staff. Governments, corporations, intelligence agencies, laboratories, campaigns, and civil-society organizations also decide who receives briefings, interviews, credentials, embargoed material, datasets, or privileged access to decision-makers. These choices can support serious expertise and protect legitimate confidentiality. They can also reward compliant intermediaries, exclude persistent critics, or leave entire subjects chronically under-investigated without a formal prohibition ever being issued.

The next layer is **selection, framing, and credentialing**. Editors, creators, researchers, officials, and institutions decide which events merit attention and which facts organize the story. Headlines, expert panels, causal language, statistical baselines, images, and moral vocabulary help structure interpretation. At the same time, credentials, citations, professional titles, fact-check labels, institutional brands, and source notices signal who should be trusted. None of these functions can be abolished in a complex society. Their legitimacy depends on whether the criteria are proportionate, disclosed where possible, open to correction, and capable of distinguishing expertise from institutional self-protection.

Public consequence then depends on **distribution, moderation, and ranking**. Publishers, broadcasters, search engines, app stores, recommender systems, hosting services, advertisers, and social platforms determine how widely material travels. Content may be removed, labeled, age-restricted, demonetized, excluded from advertising, prevented from recommendation, made harder to share, or left online but ranked so low that practical discovery collapses. The availability of speech and the reach of speech are therefore separate variables. A legal analysis may ask whether the speaker was censored; a political analysis must also ask whether visibility was materially altered and by whom.

A further layer involves **contextualization and measurement**. Fact checks, community notes, information panels, warnings, related-search prompts, and source descriptions can improve understanding or bias it. Platforms and regulators also choose which metrics count as harmful prevalence, reach, engagement, misinformation, user trust, or successful enforcement. Measurement is never merely descriptive once institutions attach penalties, resources, or policy changes to the measured category. What is counted can become what is governed.

Information power also extends into **memory**. Search archives, deindexing, account deletion, disappearing links, preservation policies, data retention, digitization priorities, and the corpora used to train or ground AI systems affect what future researchers and ordinary citizens can recover. The archive is not identical to the past. It is the surviving and discoverable record of the past. Open records, lawful freedom-of-information processes, independent archives, durable citations, and preservation standards are therefore safeguards not only for present debate but for future historical accountability.

None of these mechanisms is automatically illegitimate. Funding can sustain investigative journalism. Restricted access can protect vulnerable sources or national security. Selection makes communication possible. Framing enables comprehension. Credentialing helps nonexperts navigate complexity. Moderation protects users from fraud and abuse. Ranking prevents spam from overwhelming discovery. Context can correct lies. Measurement can expose enforcement failures. Preservation can coexist with legitimate privacy. The moral character of the system depends on truthfulness,

purpose, proportionality, transparency, due process, appeal, pluralism, and the concentration or dispersal of decision-making power.

The greatest danger appears when several mechanisms align. A disputed claim may receive little funding for investigation, limited access to officials, consistently negative framing, a low-credibility signal, recommendation demotion, advertiser withdrawal, and exclusion from prominent search or AI summaries. No single intervention may constitute censorship in the strict legal sense. Together, however, they can make a claim socially difficult to encounter. If the claim is false, those mechanisms may reduce real harm. If the claim is true, the same architecture can delay correction at enormous scale. The morality of the architecture therefore cannot be inferred from its sophistication or from the benevolence of its stated goals.

This is the central political insight of Chapter 16: **the most consequential information power often lies in the architecture of attention rather than in a dramatic prohibition.** That architecture can be publicly documented, privately implemented, commercially incentivized, politically pressured, legally regulated, and technologically automated at the same time. Its visibility does not make it harmless, its distributed character does not make it powerless, and its power does not make it omnipotent.

17. Evidence Verdict: What the Record Supports

The following verdicts synthesize the documentary and scholarly record examined in this chapter. They are not substitutes for the analysis above. They identify the strongest conclusion the evidence can responsibly bear.

| Claim                                                                                                                          | Verdict                        | Evidentiary basis                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Media ownership, funding, newsroom routines, and source dependence can affect agendas and sustainable coverage.                | STRONGLY SUPPORTED             | Comparative ownership research, agenda-setting scholarship, institutional economics, and documented funding structures show durable influence without proving automatic editorial command.                             |
| Agenda-setting and framing influence which issues become salient and how audiences encounter causal and moral interpretations. | ESTABLISHED                    | Decades of communication research, beginning with classic agenda-setting and framing studies, establishes these mechanisms as normal features of mediated communication.                                               |
| Platforms can leave content online while materially reducing its distribution through ranking and recommendation systems.      | ESTABLISHED                    | YouTube's 2019 public policy changes explicitly reduced recommendations of borderline content and reported a large decline in watch time from those recommendations.                                                   |
| Algorithmic feed design can materially alter exposure, platform use, and the composition of information users encounter.       | ESTABLISHED                    | Large field experiments on Facebook and Instagram found substantial behavioral and exposure changes when users were moved to chronological feeds.                                                                      |
| Recommendation algorithms reliably program citizens into predetermined political beliefs or polarization.                      | UNSUPPORTED AS A GENERAL CLAIM | Major 2020 election experiments found large exposure changes without detectable short-term changes in several measured political attitudes. Longer-term and context-specific effects remain an open research question. |
| Fact-checking and warning labels can improve accuracy judgments.                                                               | STRONGLY SUPPORTED             | Experimental evidence, including Martel and Rand (2024), demonstrates corrective effects even among people who distrust fact-checkers.                                                                                 |
| Fact-checkers are neutral, infallible arbiters whose labels should end inquiry.                                                | UNSUPPORTED                    | Fact-checking requires claim selection, interpretation, evidence evaluation, and correction procedures. Professional codes themselves recognize the need for transparency and safeguards.                              |

| Claim                                                                                                                                                                    | Verdict                                     | Evidentiary basis                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| United States federal officials communicated extensively with social-media platforms about misinformation and content moderation.                                        | ESTABLISHED                                 | The record summarized in <i>Murthy v. Missouri</i> documents repeated communications by White House officials, public-health agencies, the FBI, and CISA.                                                     |
| The Supreme Court held in <i>Murthy v. Missouri</i> that the federal government operated an unconstitutional censorship system.                                          | UNSUPPORTED AS A DESCRIPTION OF THE HOLDING | The Court reversed on Article III standing and did not decide the constitutional merits. It acknowledged government involvement in some choices while emphasizing platform independence in many decisions.    |
| European platform governance increasingly combines private moderation with regulatory transparency, risk-management, and co-regulatory duties.                           | ESTABLISHED                                 | The Digital Services Act, harmonized reporting rules, and the Code of Conduct on Disinformation create public legal and regulatory mechanisms governing platform practices.                                   |
| Generative AI and deepfakes create scalable capacities for impersonation, synthetic evidence, automated persuasion, and confusion over authenticity.                     | ESTABLISHED                                 | NIST risk analysis, EU AI transparency rules, FCC action on AI-generated voices, and content-provenance standards all directly address these capabilities.                                                    |
| One hidden cabal centrally directs the world's governments, mainstream media, platforms, search engines, fact-checkers, and AI systems as a unitary information command. | UNSUPPORTED                                 | The record shows concentration, overlapping incentives, cooperation, pressure, policy convergence, and specific coordination, but no verified command structure encompassing the whole information ecosystem. |
| Every official or mainstream narrative is presumptively false because institutions have lied in documented cases.                                                        | UNSUPPORTED                                 | Proven deception establishes the need for verification, not a logical rule that every subsequent institutional claim is false.                                                                                |

The table reveals why disciplined evidence is more unsettling than a totalizing theory. A centralized conspiracy would at least provide a single point of explanation. The actual information order is distributed, adaptive, commercially incentivized, legally regulated, politically pressured, technically opaque, and capable of coordinated effects without requiring one mastermind. Accountability must therefore follow mechanisms rather than myths.

## 18. The Opposite Captivity: When Distrust Becomes Its Own Propaganda System

A book devoted to hidden power must confront a danger within its own readership. Once a person discovers that governments have lied, intelligence services have conducted covert operations, companies have manipulated users, experts have been wrong, and platforms have suppressed material, a psychological inversion can occur. Institutional trust collapses into automatic institutional disbelief.

This feels like independence, but it can become another form of dependence. The person no longer asks whether a claim is true. He asks whether an institution he distrusts endorsed it. If the institution said yes, he assumes no. The establishment remains the controlling reference point, only with the sign reversed.

Alternative-information ecosystems can reproduce every failure they condemn in mainstream media. They can reward sensational headlines, cherry-picked documents, anonymous sources, algorithm-friendly outrage, patron-funded narratives, insider mystique, influencer loyalty, and social punishment for dissent. A commentator can build authority by presenting himself as one of the few who “really understands” hidden events. Corrections may threaten the brand because certainty is more marketable than revision.

This is why a conspiracy culture can become epistemically closed. Evidence against a claim is treated as evidence of the cover-up. The absence of evidence proves how secret the operation must be. A failed prediction is reinterpreted as proof that exposure forced the plan to change. Every institution that disagrees is added to the conspiracy. The theory becomes impossible to falsify because no imaginable observation could count against it.

Such a worldview is not biblical discernment. [Isaiah 8:12–13](#), already examined in Chapter 3, warns God's people not to be governed by the conspiracy-fears of the surrounding society but to regard the LORD as holy. The passage does not deny that conspiracies exist. Scripture itself records plots. Its force is that fear of plots must not become a rival lord.

Paul describes a different pathology in [2 Timothy 4:3–4](#): people gather teachers according to their own desires and turn away from truth toward myths. The text is often applied only to liberal theology or false religion. Its anthropology is broader. Human beings prefer information that flatters prior desire. An anti-establishment reader can possess itching ears as readily as an establishment reader.

The remedy is not restored naivety. It is disciplined freedom. The Christian should be able to say, “This government document is reliable on this point and deceptive on another. This alternative investigator uncovered a real record and overreached in the conclusion. This fact-check is correct. This fact-check is weak. This mainstream report is well sourced. This independent report is better. I will follow evidence rather than tribe.” That posture is intellectually demanding because it sacrifices the emotional comfort of a permanent enemy category.

## 19. Christian Epistemology: Truth, Testimony, Humility, and the Fear of the Lord

Christian epistemology begins neither with institutional prestige nor with radical skepticism. It begins with God. The God of Scripture does not merely possess correct information. He is faithful, cannot lie, knows all things without error, and reveals Himself truly. Human knowledge is therefore possible because reality is created and sustained by a truthful God, while human knowledge remains finite because human beings are creatures.

This Creator-creature distinction prevents two opposite idolatries. The first is technocratic omniscience, the belief that enough data, expertise, computation, or institutional coordination can overcome the limits of creaturely knowledge. The second is conspiratorial omniscience, the belief that the investigator can infer the hidden cause of every event from patterns inaccessible to ordinary observers. Both imitate divine perspective.

Scripture repeatedly commends evidence-sensitive judgment. [Proverbs 18:13](#) condemns answering before listening. [Proverbs 18:17](#) observes that the first case can appear right until cross-examination. [Deuteronomy 19:15](#) establishes the importance of corroborating testimony in judicial settings. [James 1:19](#) commends readiness to listen and slowness to speak. These texts do not form a modern historiography manual, but they cultivate the moral habits without which good historiography collapses.

Christian knowledge also depends on testimony. No person can directly verify everything he reasonably knows. We rely on parents, witnesses, maps, medical professionals, historians, engineers, translators, pastors, and records. The question is not whether to trust testimony but how to trust responsibly. Credible testimony should be proportioned to competence, access, honesty, corroboration, transparency, incentives, and track record.

Sola Scriptura must be stated precisely in this context. Scripture is the Church's final infallible rule for faith and doctrine. It does not tell us the current number of users on a digital platform, the content of a classified memorandum, or the statistical effect of a recommender system. Those are empirical questions requiring ordinary evidence. Scripture governs how we seek and use that evidence. It forbids false witness, partiality, slander, idolatry, fear, and deceit. It commands justice, truth, humility, and love.

This means Christians must be unusually willing to correct themselves. If the evidence refutes a cherished theory, fidelity to Christ requires surrendering the theory. [Ephesians 4:25](#) commands believers to put away lying and speak truth to one another. The command does not contain an exemption for lies told in defense of a good cause. False evidence against a corrupt institution remains false evidence.

Nor does biblical truthfulness require moral neutrality toward power. The prophets confronted kings. John the Baptist rebuked Herod. Jesus exposed hypocrisy. The apostles refused commands that contradicted God's authority. Christian epistemic humility is not timidity. It is the courage to accuse only when the evidence justifies accusation and to keep speaking when the evidence does.

The Church should therefore cultivate what might be called a covenant of truthful attention. We will not reward sensationalism merely because it confirms our fears. We will not dismiss witnesses because their testimony embarrasses institutions we respect. We will read primary documents where possible. We will distinguish what a source proves from what we infer. We will hear counter-evidence. We will retract errors. We will refuse collective guilt. We will keep Christ, not secret knowledge, at the center.

## 20. Deception as Spiritual Warfare Without Hatred of Flesh and Blood

The information battlefield has a spiritual dimension because Scripture treats deception as a central strategy of evil. Jesus calls the devil a liar and the father of lies ([John 8:44](#)). Revelation describes Satan as the deceiver of the whole world ([Revelation 12:9](#)). Paul warns that "evil people and impostors will become worse, deceiving and being deceived" ([2 Timothy 3:13](#)). The last phrase is crucial. Deceivers need not understand the full deception in which they participate. People can spread falsehood sincerely.

This is one reason the book's theology does not require a human supercommittee to explain broad spiritual convergence. Institutions can reward the same sins independently. Pride can make rulers resist correction. Profit can reward outrage. Ideology can filter evidence. Fear can make citizens accept coercion. Vanity can make influencers exaggerate certainty. Career incentives can silence dissent. Tribal loyalty can make communities excuse lies from allies. Behind these human mechanisms, Scripture identifies a deeper spiritual enemy who delights in falsehood, accusation, idolatry, and rebellion against God.

Yet [Ephesians 6:12](#) restrains Christian anger by declaring that the struggle is not against flesh and blood. A platform moderator is not a demon. A journalist who repeats a false claim is not the ultimate enemy. A government official who abuses pressure remains a human being accountable to God and capable of repentance. An alternative commentator who spreads a rumor is likewise a neighbor, not a target for hatred.

This distinction guards the Church against dehumanization. Conspiracy narratives become spiritually toxic when they turn persons into symbols of cosmic evil and thereby excuse contempt, harassment, or violence. Biblical spiritual warfare does the opposite. It tells believers that the true battle is deeper than the person in front of them, which permits moral clarity without hatred.

The weapons Paul names are correspondingly unlike propaganda. The armor includes truth, righteousness, gospel readiness, faith, salvation, the Word of God, and prayer ([Ephesians 6:13–18](#)). Christian warfare cannot be conducted through fabricated evidence, manipulated clips, anonymous defamation, or strategically misleading statistics. A lie cannot become a weapon of the God of truth.

[1 Timothy 4:1](#) also warns that some will depart from the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons. The primary application concerns apostasy and false teaching, not a license to demonize technological policy. Still, the text reminds the Church that ideas have spiritual consequences. A system becomes spiritually dangerous when it trains people to worship creatures, redefine evil as good, surrender conscience to human authority, despise truth, or accept deception as necessary for social order.

The deepest threat of information control is therefore not that a platform might hide one post. It is that a society may lose the moral capacity to love truth. When people care only whether a narrative advances their side, deception has already won at the level of character.

## 21. A Church That Cannot Be Easily Manipulated

The Christian response to information power must become ecclesial, not merely individual. A believer with excellent personal discernment can still be overwhelmed if the church around him rewards rumor, celebrity authority, partisan certainty, or prophetic novelty. Congregations therefore need habits that form truthful people before the next crisis arrives, so that discernment is not improvised under fear.

That formation begins with deep, contextual teaching of Scripture and a culture in which correction is normal. A congregation familiar only with isolated proof texts is vulnerable to anyone who attaches biblical language to political fear. Whole-Bible literacy teaches believers to recognize genre, covenant, context, the movement of redemptive history, and the difference between explicit prophecy and imaginative application. Leaders should reinforce that discipline by correcting themselves publicly when necessary. A pastor who can say, “I was wrong about that claim,” without theatrical self-defense teaches the church that truth is more precious than reputation. Such correction is not a collapse of authority; when practiced faithfully, it is authority submitted to the Lord of truth.

Congregations should also recover primary-source habits appropriate to ordinary Christian life. Most believers are not professional historians, lawyers, scientists, or intelligence analysts, and humility requires them not to pretend otherwise. Yet before sharing a sensational quotation, they can ask whether the speech, statute, court opinion, institutional policy, report, study, or video exists in full. Before repeating an allegation, they can distinguish what the source actually says from what a commentator infers. When a crisis forces decisions before complete evidence is available, church leaders can state calibrated judgments plainly: “This is our best assessment from the evidence presently available.” Such language neither paralyzes action nor pretends revelation. It protects trust by distinguishing urgency from certainty.

Embodied Christian community provides another safeguard that algorithmic media cannot reproduce. Local churches place believers beside people of different ages, professions, histories, temperaments, and social experiences who are nevertheless bound to one another in Christ. A physician, lawyer, engineer, journalist, teacher, laborer, civil servant, parent, student, and retiree can test one another's assumptions in ways that a homogeneous online following rarely can. The body of Christ is not an affinity group assembled by a recommender system. Its diversity can become an epistemic gift when

believers listen patiently, refuse status games, and submit every expertise to Scripture and Christian love.

The Church must simultaneously resist the monetization of fear. Christian media, ministries, publishers, and influencers are not exempt from the incentives of the attention economy. Apocalyptic thumbnails, breathless claims, “suppressed document” marketing, permanent emergency, and insinuations that only insiders possess the truth can attract clicks, donations, subscriptions, and loyalty. A ministry whose economic model depends on keeping its audience frightened will face a recurring temptation to discover a new crisis before the previous one has been tested. [1 Peter 5:2](#) warns shepherds against dishonest gain. The principle reaches directly into Christian participation in the attention economy: the flock must not be treated as a market for anxiety.

Prayer completes rather than replaces these disciplines. Prayer is the confession that God possesses the knowledge and sovereignty we do not. [Philippians 4:6–7](#) directs anxious believers toward prayer, petition, and thanksgiving, not toward compulsive surveillance of every rumor. A praying church can investigate evil without becoming psychologically owned by it, confront deceit without learning to love accusation, and remain watchful without turning watchfulness into fear. Such a church is difficult to manipulate because its deepest allegiance, emotional security, and final authority lie outside the information market altogether.

## 22. The Blessed Hope Is Not Information Superiority

The information environment described in this chapter naturally raises eschatological questions. A world of identity-linked platforms, global communications, algorithmic visibility, synthetic media, automated persuasion, and rapid cross-border coordination possesses capacities earlier generations could scarcely imagine. Later chapters will ask how such capacities relate to biblical prophecy. Chapter 16 must preserve the distinction between capability and fulfillment.

The New Testament does warn of climactic deception. [2 Thessalonians 2:9–12](#) associates the man of lawlessness with satanic activity, false wonders, unrighteous deception, and refusal to love the truth. [Matthew 24:24](#) warns of false messiahs and false prophets capable of great signs. [Revelation 13:11–18](#) portrays deception as part of the final crisis of allegiance. These passages justify serious attention to the moral and technological conditions under which deception can operate at scale.

They do not authorize the Church to identify every new moderation system, AI model, fact-checking network, or search feature as the prophetic mechanism. Chapter 17 will examine convergence. Chapter 18 will address the Antichrist system and the crisis of allegiance. Chapter 19 will present the full exegetical case for the book’s pre-tribulation understanding of the rapture while acknowledging faithful evangelical disagreement. The present chapter makes a narrower pastoral claim.

The Blessed Hope is not the hope that Christians will out-analyze every intelligence service, decode every algorithm, or expose every hidden network before Christ comes. Paul comforts believers with the promise that the Lord Himself will descend, the dead in Christ will rise, and living believers will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord ([1 Thessalonians 4:13–18](#)). He then calls the children of light to wakefulness, sobriety, faith, love, and hope ([1 Thessalonians 5:4–11](#)). Readiness is moral and Christological before it is informational.

This pre-tribulation hope should make the Church harder to manipulate, not easier. A believer awaiting Christ does not need a political savior. He does not need to preserve access to every platform at the cost of conscience. He does not need to panic when institutions grow powerful. He also does not need to invent prophetic certainty in order to prove that the times are serious.

No recommender-system update provides a rapture date. No AI transparency regulation supplies a prophetic calendar. No censorship lawsuit identifies the hour of Christ's coming. Date-setting remains disobedient speculation. The proper response to increasing capacity for deception is greater fidelity to the truth already revealed.

### 23. Conclusion: The Last Word Does Not Belong to the Feed

The evidence examined in this chapter establishes a transformation in the structure of public knowledge. The modern information order is no longer governed primarily by a small number of newspaper editors or broadcast networks, although legacy media remain influential. It is a layered system in which ownership, funding, access, professional expertise, platform policy, ranking, recommendation, fact-checking, government communication, regulation, search, artificial intelligence, and user behavior interact.

Several forms of power are no longer seriously disputable. Media organizations set agendas. Frames shape interpretation. Platforms remove and demote. Recommender systems alter exposure. Search engines rank. AI systems synthesize. Fact-checkers label. Governments communicate with platforms about disputed information. Regulators impose transparency and risk duties. Generative AI can manufacture realistic synthetic evidence. Technical systems increasingly mediate not only what people are permitted to say but what they are likely to encounter.

The evidence also sets firm limits. Algorithms are not omnipotent mind-control machines. Major experiments show that substantial changes in feeds can alter exposure and behavior without producing detectable short-term changes in several political attitudes. Fact-checking can improve accuracy. Platform moderation can protect users from real harms. Government communication with platforms is not automatically unconstitutional coercion. The Supreme Court did not decide in *Murthy v. Missouri* that a comprehensive federal censorship regime had been proven. The EU's transparency rules contain accountability mechanisms as well as regulatory risks. One global hidden command center directing the whole information ecosystem has not been demonstrated.

What has been demonstrated is in some respects more challenging: **the power to define practical reality can be distributed across institutions and still be concentrated enough to matter profoundly.** A citizen can be formally free while moving through an environment in which attention, authority, and discovery are heavily structured. The proper political response is neither blind trust nor indiscriminate destruction of institutions. It is accountable power: transparency, pluralism, due process, appeal, open evidence, independent research, lawful limits, and protection for conscience and truthful dissent.

The spiritual danger runs deeper. Human beings can become so habituated to curated reality that they cease to ask whether they love truth at all. The official may suppress inconvenient evidence for the sake of policy. The corporation may optimize engagement at the expense of wisdom. The activist may circulate a false story because it advances justice as he defines it. The alternative commentator may exaggerate a document because outrage grows an audience. The Christian may forward a rumor because it confirms an eschatological expectation. In every case the same temptation appears: truth becomes subordinate to usefulness.

Scripture refuses that bargain. God is true. Christ is the truth. The devil is a liar. The Church's warfare begins with truth. Therefore no cause, however urgent, grants permission to bear false witness. No institution, however prestigious, deserves unquestioned faith. No outsider, however persecuted, becomes truthful by persecution alone. No secret document saves. No algorithm damns by its mere existence. Every

claim must be tested, every power judged morally, and every conscience brought under the lordship of Christ.

For the unbelieving reader, the greatest deception is not an algorithmic feed. It is the ancient lie that a human being can stand before God on his own terms. Sin does not merely distort institutions. It separates persons from their Creator. The gospel announces that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, died for sinners and rose bodily from the dead. God now commands people everywhere to repent ([Acts 17:30–31](#)). Salvation is not achieved by discovering hidden knowledge, escaping a media system, or joining the correct political tribe. “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” ([Romans 10:9](#)).

For believers, the call is equally concrete. Love truth enough to lose an argument. Refuse slander even when directed at powerful enemies. Read before sharing. Pray before reacting. Keep company with believers who can correct you. Teach children how to distinguish evidence from virality. Protect freedom of conscience for neighbors with whom you disagree. Support honest journalism and scholarship where it exists. Demand accountability from platforms and governments without pretending that alternative media are immune to sin. Above all, remain faithful to Christ.

The last word over history will not be written by a newsroom, intelligence service, social platform, search engine, regulator, fact-checker, billionaire, government ministry, or artificial intelligence. [Revelation 19:11](#) presents the returning Christ as Faithful and True. The information battlefield is therefore serious, but it is not ultimate. The One who knows every hidden thing and judges with perfect knowledge is coming.

Chapter 17 now takes the historical findings of Chapters 4 through 16 and asks the question this book has deliberately postponed until the evidentiary groundwork was complete: are the political, financial, technological, religious, cultural, and informational capacities of the modern world converging in ways that illuminate the concrete expectations of biblical prophecy? The answer must be sought with the same discipline required here, refusing both unbelieving dismissal and prophetic sensationalism. Capability is not fulfillment. Resemblance is not identity. Yet watchfulness is not optional. The Church must know the times without surrendering to them, and it must keep its lamp burning for the Bridegroom.

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