

## Abstract

This thesis examines how social media platforms are governed and regulated in the contemporary setting of 2024. Due to the size and reach of these platforms and the companies behind them, their impact on individuals, societies, and geopolitical dynamics has become a widely discussed topic worldwide.

Employing a single case study design, the study examines empirical data from the congressional hearing on *'Big Tech and the Online Child Exploitation Crisis'* and YouTube comments from three channels that streamed and posted the hearing. Employing Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, the study investigates the textual and discursive features of the hearing and the comment sections, representing committee members, five CEOs, and YouTube users. Additionally, Mark Dawson's Normative Framework of accountability and Michel Foucault's Disciplinary Power and Biopower concepts are applied to contextualize the findings within broader social setting.

The findings reveal multiple perspectives on social media regulation. Committee members stress the urgency of corporate responsibility in protecting children online, advocating for stricter platform regulations. The CEOs emphasize collective responsibility, promoting user agency in self-regulation. YouTube users argue for parental and individual responsibility, arguing that child protection is primarily a parental responsibility. These ongoing negotiations illustrate the complicity of social regulation. Applying a theoretical lens, the CEOs can be seen negotiating accountability initiatives, heavily influenced by the committee members' framing of questions. This highlights the committee members role in shaping discourses of normative accountability throughout the hearing. Power dynamics, both in regulating the platforms and in negotiating solutions, continually impact all actors, revealing how underlying social norms and the discourses employed affect the overall governance of the platforms and individuals' self-regulations.

This underscores the need for enhanced collaboration efforts among legislative bodies, corporations, and individuals to ensure effective child safety regulations online. Overall, this thesis underscores the challenges of governing social media in 2024, particularly in protecting children online.

# Negotiating Accountability and Power Dynamics: Governing Social Media Platforms in 2024

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Thesis project, 4<sup>th</sup> semester

Culture, Communication and Globalization

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# Table of Content

<b>1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 BIG TECH UNDER GLOBAL POLITICAL SCRUTINY .....	2
1.2 THE BATTLE FOR TECHNOLOGICAL SUPREMACY .....	4
1.3 CHILDREN ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS .....	6
1.4 PROBLEM FORMULATION: .....	7
<b>2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 GOVERNANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS .....	10
2.2 DISCOURSE AND POWER .....	13
<b>3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>16</b>
3.1 ACCOUNTABILITY WITHIN THE DIGITAL SPHERE.....	17
3.1.1 <i>Four normative goods</i> .....	18
3.2 POWER DYNAMICS.....	20
3.2.1 <i>Conceptualizing Foucault</i> .....	20
3.2.2 <i>Discourse and power/knowledge</i> .....	21
3.2.3 <i>Disciplinary power</i> .....	23
3.2.3.1 Panopticism .....	24
3.1.2 <i>Biopower</i> .....	25
3.1.2.1 State racism .....	26
<b>4. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....</b>	<b>26</b>
4.1 PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE .....	27
4.1.1 <i>Ontology</i> .....	27
4.1.2 <i>Epistemology</i> .....	28
4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN.....	29
4.3 CASE DESCRIPTION .....	29
4.3.1 <i>Congressional records and transcriptions</i> .....	30
4.3.2 <i>Social media data</i> .....	31
4.3.3 <i>Ethical consideration</i> .....	33
4.4 RESEARCH CRITERIA .....	34
4.5 CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS.....	35
4.5.1 <i>A three-dimensional approach to analysis</i> .....	36
4.5.1.1 Textual analysis.....	37
4.5.1.2 Discursive analysis .....	38
4.5.1.3 Social dimension .....	39
<b>5. ANALYSIS.....</b>	<b>39</b>
5.1 PART ONE: TEXTUAL AND DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS .....	39
5.1.1 <i>Talking on behalf of the parents and the population of America</i> .....	40
5.1.2 <i>Social media companies are failing</i> .....	42
5.1.3 <i>Representing the companies</i> .....	44
5.1.4 <i>Collective responsibility</i> .....	45
5.1.5 <i>Placing the transcript in a discursive dimension</i> .....	47
5.1.6 <i>YouTube comments</i> .....	48
5.1.7 <i>Comments in the Discursive Dimension</i> .....	50
5.1.8 <i>Sub-conclusion</i> .....	52
5.2 PART TWO: THEORETICAL ANALYSIS .....	53
5.2.1 <i>Negotiating accountability</i> .....	53
5.2.1.1 Openness .....	53
5.2.1.2 Non-arbitrariness.....	55
5.2.1.3 Effectiveness .....	56
5.2.1.4 Publicness .....	58

5.2.1.5 Sub-conclusion .....	59
5.2.2 <i>Underlying power dynamics</i> .....	60
5.2.2.1 Content Moderation and the Exercise of Disciplinary Power .....	60
5.2.2.2 Dynamics of mutual surveillance .....	62
5.2.2.3 Governing the Population .....	64
5.2.2.4 Sub-conclusion .....	66
<b>6. DISCUSSION</b> .....	<b>67</b>
6.1 DISCOURSES ON REGULATIONS .....	67
6.2 LIMITATION OF THEORY .....	68
6.3 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY .....	69
<b>7. CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>70</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>72</b>

## Appendices:

Appendix A: Transcription

Appendix B: YouTube Comments

# 1. Introduction

As of January 2024, the number of social media users worldwide was estimated to be approximately 5.04 billion (Wearesocial & Meltwater, 2024, p. 208). The most popular platforms include Facebook with 3.049 billion global active users, followed by YouTube with 2.491 billion, WhatsApp with 2 billion, Instagram with 2 billion, and TikTok with 1.562 billion users. Further down the list is Snapchat with 750 million users, followed by X<sup>1</sup> with 691 million users (Wearesocial & Meltwater, 2024, p. 232). Social media has become an integral part of modern communication, shaping how people interact in and with the world. Due to its popularity, social media not only serves as a platform where people can interact in their daily lives, but also as a central sphere where social, political, and economic debates occur internationally and cross-culturally (Zeng & Tao, 2023, p. 24-25). These social media platforms are owned by so-called big tech<sup>2</sup> companies, capitalizing on providing their service to a consumer audience. People can freely create user accounts on social media platforms such as Facebook or TikTok, but they pay with their personal data or awareness by receiving targeted advertising on their pages (D'Annunzio & Menichelli, 2022, p. 572-573). Social media data is valuable because of the size and reflectiveness of people's contemporary behaviors and attitudes, but can also contain biases, is often algorithmic confounding and can be ethically and political sensitive (Zeng & Tao, 2023, p. 25).

In 2018, the Cambridge Analytica (CA) scandal triggered a discussion on data privacy and the use of data gathered by big tech. The scandal centered around the company CA gaining access to personal data of 87 million Facebook users without prior consent and using it to create voter personality profiles, which were then used to target audiences with advertisements (González et al., 2019, p. 1). A study conducted in 2019 by Felipe González, Yihan Yu, Andrea Figueroa, Claudia López, and Cecilia Aragon showed that the scandal had a significant impact on users' understanding of data privacy, but it differed globally. When comparing Spanish and English-speaking users, the study found that Russia was much less relevant for Spanish speakers, whereas English tweets were very focused on how Russia might have intervened, using CA data, in the 2016 US election. In the study,

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<sup>1</sup> The company twitter, changed name to X in July of 2023 (Ivanova, 2023)

<sup>2</sup> The term 'big tech' is referring to multinational technological cooperation such as Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, Google, Meta, Alibaba, and Netflix (Birch, 2022, p.2)

the majority of English-speaking users noted were American, and their reactions therefore reflected the relations to their national contemporary reality. The Spanish tweets were mostly centered on the closure of CA, which related more to the consequences faced in the EU and which could impact European cooperation (González et al, 2019, p. 4). In America, the CEO of Meta<sup>3</sup>, Mark Zuckerberg, was asked to testify in front of Congress as a direct result of the CA scandal and the concerns it raised regarding online safety and the governance of personal data (U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2018). Later, he also testified in the European Parliament, where he faced similar questions (European Parliament, 2018). In the CA scandal study, González et al. found that English speakers were more focused on the American hearing, and vice versa, showing that local news had more impact on the attention of the online user. The Spanish speakers referred to the hearing in America but seemed more interested in how the European hearing could impact business locally (González, F. et al., 2019, p. 6). Since the scandal, there has been a noticeable focus on the impact and power of social media platforms. This scrutiny has extended to the legal realm, where social media's role in various court cases worldwide has become increasingly prominent.

## **1.1 Big tech under global political scrutiny**

Internationally, significant attention has been directed towards the governance of big tech companies and social media platforms (Birch, 2022, p. 1; Scaramuzzi, 2023). The European Union (EU) has been referred to as 'the global leader in tech regulation' in several news media outlets (Coulter, 2023; O'Carroll, 2023; Amaro, 2021), referring to the legislative steps taken against big tech as seen in the Digital Market Act and the AI Act. In the Digital Services Act, the EU imposes obligations on several tech giants including Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, Apple's online App Store, and Google's services such as YouTube, to mitigate the dissemination of harmful content (O'Carroll, 2023). These obligations encompass the prohibition and restriction of specific user-targeting practices, along with limitations on the sharing of user data with third parties (European Parliament & Council, 2022, §§ 5, 27, 44). Failure by these companies to adhere to the regulatory requirements may entail consequences, including the possibility of fines or penalties imposed by the European member country lodging the complaint (European Parliament & Council, 2022, art. 51(c)).

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<sup>3</sup> Meta is the parent company of Facebook, Instagram, Treads and WhatsApp (Meta, 2023)

In South Korea, the government has proposed a regulatory bill modeled after the European Digital Market Act aimed at curbing the influence of major technological companies, specifically American tech firms (Ministry of Science and ICT, 2023). However, according to The New York Times, the backlash against this political initiative has been significant enough to postpone its implementation. One argument against was that South Korean companies would also be targeted, and that the initiative might inadvertently benefit emerging competitors from China. Speaking to The New York Times, The Chairman of the Korea Fair Trade Commission Han Ki-jeoung stated that the regulations were necessary because *'behind the rapid growth of innovative services lies the abuse of power by a small number of monopolizing platforms'* (Jin & Wakabayashi, 2024). Domestically, China has focused on regulating medical and financial misinformation on social media. Notably, influencers are now required to validate their qualifications when discussing certain topics, addressing concerns raised by Chinese social media users who have encountered misguided advice. Furthermore, in August 2021, new laws were implemented to limit the amount of time teenagers and children under 18 could spend playing online games, aiming to combat internet addiction among citizens (Nast, 2022).

In several African countries, including Zimbabwe (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2019), Ethiopia (Ethiopia, 2020), and Uganda (Uganda Parliament, 2022), the regulation of social media through legal measures is evident. However, the focus here differs, as the legal measures are criticized for not prioritizing the protection of users against the misuse of data by tech companies. Instead, they emphasize heavy regulation and surveillance laid down by the government, which impedes people's ability to freely express themselves or question their leaders without consequences (Karombo, 2020). According to Ilori (2021), efforts to utilize social media platforms among protesters to foster democratic development in Africa have intensified over the past decade. However, these endeavors are being impeded by government regulation, which often targets legitimate online speech instead of addressing issues such as disinformation and hate speech. In 2020, the internet in Chad was intentionally slowed down to counteract the spread of messages "inciting hate" on social media (Al Jazeera, 2020). Amnesty International contends that the frequent shutdowns in Chad constitute a direct violation of human rights, as they restrict people's access to news and hinder civil society's ability to organize protests, particularly during elections or political scandals (Amnesty International, 2021). Misinformation and hate speech are increasingly problematic online, yet in Africa, governments have not adequately addressed these issues without infringing upon freedom of expression. Ilori (2021) highlights the lack of accountability on the part of big tech companies,

indicating that private firms are failing in speech regulation. This is particularly concerning given their significant influence across Africa's struggling democracies. Where does the regulatory responsibility truly belong? At what point do legislations cross the line into oppression for citizens? Are politicians and big tech engaging in meaningful negotiations to address these complex issues, and what ramifications does this hold for the future of human rights?

## **1.2 The battle for technological supremacy**

When examining the governance of social media platforms, two countries of particular interest are China and the United States (US). The largest social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram are owned by American-based companies (Meta, 2023; Google 2023), followed by TikTok, which is owned by the Chinese-based company ByteDance (ByteDance, 2022). The two countries differ especially when it comes to their view on the market. The foundation for US tech giants and for the current global digital economy is the American Market-Driven Regulatory model. This model centers on protecting free speech, a free internet, and incentivizing innovation. It places faith in markets as opposed to government regulation and views the internet as a source of economic prosperity and political freedom, a tool for societal transformation and progress. One aspect of this model is that the government needs to step aside to maximize the private sector's means for innovation to foster individual freedom, excluding protecting national security, including cybersecurity, where both the government and private sector play a role (Bradford, 2023, p. 33). This stands in contrast to the Chinese state-driven regulatory model, which seeks to harness technology to strengthen government control. China has shown that although the US model helped generate innovation within the global digital market, the Chinese model has also demonstrated equal success in building tech companies. This success has legitimized a more state-driven alternative to governance, and governments seeking alternatives to the US model turn to this model to effectively manage their digital economy and societies (Bradford, 2023, p. 69).

China employs a formal mechanism known as the "Great Firewall of China" to censor Western social media platforms, effectively excluding major tech companies from the Chinese market. This dynamic grant a competitive edge to domestically owned social media entities (Xu & Albert, 2017). With an estimated internet user base of over 1 billion in 2023, China represents a very large domestic market (Petrosyan, 2023). In contrast, Chinese tech companies have traditionally faced fewer obstacles when operating in the US, as the US model is based on welcoming foreign companies. However, this is

starting to change due to the growing rivalry between the two (Bradford, 2024, p. 151). The Chinese model relies on strong ties to the Chinese communist party (CCP), and Chinese private tech companies, each helping each other in obtaining their goals. In return for less regulation, these tech companies have often performed surveillance and control function on their users. For the CCP digital technologies can help harness the leaderships legitimacy in economic growth, social stability, and nationalism. The internet is seen as a tool for control, propaganda, and state surveillance domestically, but also as a place for technological leadership and digital sovereignty (Bradford, 2023, p. 71-72). Globally, the two superpowers are in a battle for technological supremacy, a fight with strong ideological undertones and potentially significant geopolitical consequences. The US-China tech war is impacting the global digital economy and global supply chains, by unsettling tech companies, the financial market, and international relations beyond their own internal conflict. As the US-China relationship deteriorates, optimism for greater Chinese integration with the rest of the world diminishes. Instead, China's prominent role in the global economy and its unwillingness to follow the international economic order have fueled resentment in the West (Bradford, 2023, p 184).

The US and China have different narratives surrounding the tech war. For the US, the trade and tech war are a response to the CCP's pursuit of unfair economic policies, including the exclusion of foreign companies from thriving within the Chinese market. The US also references China's oppressive human rights practices. In China, they view restrictive measures of the US as an attempt to contain China and preserve the US-dominated economic and political order (Bradford, 2023, p. 185) Despite the battle for technological supremacy, both countries are of the view that the largest tech companies and their leaders have become too powerful to be left unchecked. (Bradford, 2023, p. 71). In China, this has resulted in new anti-monopoly guidelines and anti-trust laws, aiming to prohibit agreements that restrict or eliminate competition (Foster et al, 2023). In the US, several social media companies have been asked to appear in court to answer questions regarding various issues, including violation of the First Amendment (Preserving Free Speech and Reining in Big Tech Censorship, 2024), online protection of children (S.Hrg. 118-33 – Platform Accountability: Gonzalez and reform, 2024), as well as data protection and ties to China in the case of TikTok (TikTok: How Congress Can Safeguard American Data Privacy and Protect Children from Online Harms, 2024).

### 1.3 Children on social media platforms

Protection of children on the internet is a global issue encompassing various topics. According to the United Nations (UN), risks for young people online include cyberbullying, hate speech, disinformation, privacy violations, commodification through targeted ads, and sexual exploitation and abuse of children (United Nations, n.d.). To combat this, various guidelines have been published by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), such as the '*Guidelines for Parents and Educators on Child Online Protection*' (ITU, 2020a) and '*Guidelines for Policymakers on Child Online Protection*' (ITU, 2020b), providing recommendations for both parental figures, cooperation policies, and governmental entities to ensure internet safety for children.

In mainstream American media, the ongoing debate surrounding children's use of social media can frequently be observed. One debate revolves around so-called influencer parents who share their children on social media platforms. The debate questions whether the children are being publicly overexposed and financially exploited by their parents, and whether this decision regarding sharing content online of their own children should solely be up to the parents (Nwoko, 2024; Steinberg, 2020; Yamada, 2023). Another debate concerns children's mental health and whether their use of social media could be harmful (Kindelan, 2024; Zafar, 2023; Penley, 2024). In an article published by ABC News, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that kids should not move their lives online; instead, they should live in the real world and play together to maintain good mental health (Kindelan, 2024). A reoccurring debate in American mainstream media (Thompson, 2024; Coulter, 2024; Solon, 2020), as well as in political settings (MacCarthy, 2023), has been on preventing online exploitation of children online. This debate also pertains to the question of accountability, as seen in the campaign 'Healthy Young Minds', which in 2023 pushed for the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) to impose responsibility on big tech companies (Steyer, 2023). Additionally, there's an ongoing debate regarding Section 230, which protects companies from being liability for third-party content such as posts or pictures (Morrison, 2023). In January 2024, a congressional hearing specifically addressing big tech's accountability in protecting children on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Discord, and TikTok was held (Fung & Duffy, 2024). This case serves as an example in this thesis in understanding the negotiation of responsibility in protecting children online through the governing of social media platforms, leading to the formulation of the following problem.

## 1.4 Problem formulation:

*What discourses are constructed concerning regulations of online safety for children in the case of 'Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis', and how do these reflect the negotiation of accountability and the underlying power dynamics in governing social media platforms among the US Congress, social media companies, and individuals in 2024?*

This thesis aims to gain insight into how social media platforms are regulated by examining the discourses and interactions between the US Congress, represented by its committee members; social media companies, represented by their CEOs; and individuals, studied through YouTube users' comments of the hearing. Empirical material, including a transcript from the congressional hearing (Hendrix et al., 2024), as well as YouTube comments made on three channels on which the hearing was livestreamed and uploaded (CBS News, 2024; CNBC Television, 2024; Associated Press, 2024), is utilized in the analysis. To identify and analyze these discourses Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of critical discourse analysis is utilized (Fairclough, 2006). In the societal dimension, a theoretical lens of normative accountability by Mark Dawson (2022) and power dynamics conceptualized from the works of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1991; 2020) will be applied to identify and understand the underlying social structures related to the regulation of social media platforms. This examination will be conducted through a lens of social constructivism, which emphasizes the role of social processes in shaping individuals' understanding and behavior (Berger & Luckmann, 2011, p. 164). The analysis is structured around the three-dimensional model, aiming first to analyze the discourses from textual and discursive dimensions, and secondly to view them through a societal lens, addressing the following research questions:

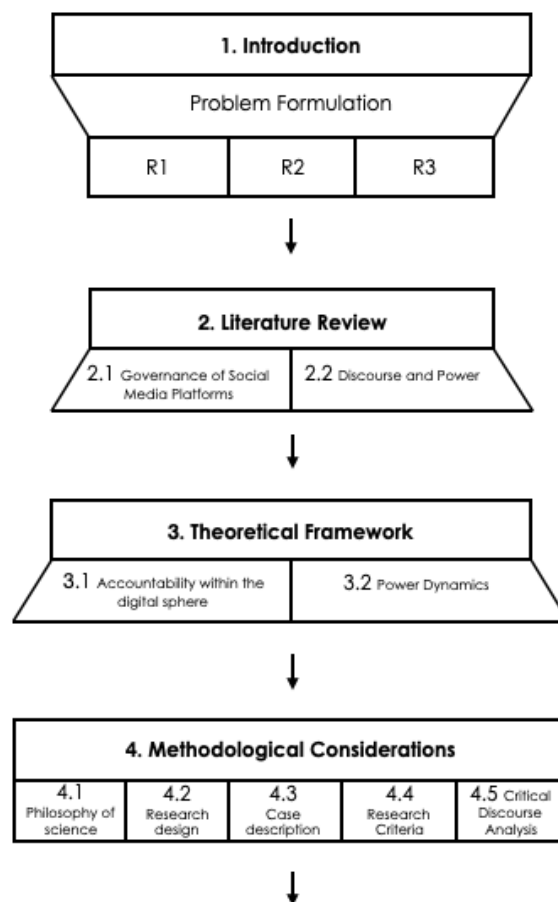
**Research question 1:** *What textual and discursive features do the transcripts from the congressional hearing and YouTube comment section have, and which discourses can be seen as constructed through these features?*

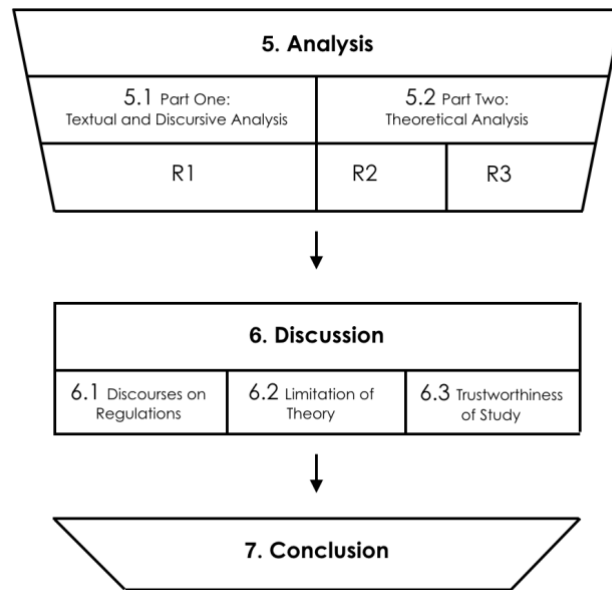
The first part of the analysis will focus on addressing research question 1 by examining the textual and discursive features present in the two empirical materials being utilized. The primary objective is to identify how discourses are shaped and negotiated among the actors within the spheres they emerge from.

**Research question 2:** *How do the discourses constructed by committee members, the five CEOs, and YouTube users regarding the regulation of online safety for children reflect the negotiation of accountability between these entities?*

**Research question 3:** *How do the underlying power dynamics between committee members, the five CEOs, and YouTube users shape the governance of social media platforms in 2024, and how are these dynamics reflected in the discourse on regulation?*

The second part of the analysis situates the discourses constructed and negotiated among the actors of inquiry within a social dimension of study. In addressing research question 2, the focus will be on how accountability is constructed and negotiated through Dawson's framework of four normative goods (Dawson, 2022). Similarly, in answering research question 3, the focus will be on how underlying power dynamics among the actors is shaping the governance of social media platforms in 2024. The project will be structured in seven sections as visualized below.





Model 1: Project structure

In model 1 the structure of this project is visualized, providing an overview of sections included. The thesis begins with an introduction to the ongoing debate surrounding the regulation of social media platforms worldwide, presenting a problem formulation which frames the study and is structured around three research questions. The subsequent section presents existing literature relevant to the topic of social media governance, discourses, and power dynamics. This is followed by the theoretical framework, which introduces and conceptualizes the theoretical lens utilized throughout the analysis. Subsequently, methodological considerations are outlined. An analysis of the empirical data follows, addressing the three research questions, and concludes with a discussion and a final section for conclusions.

## 2. Literature review

The following literature review presents relevant research and scholars concerned with the topic of social media governance and the power dynamics surrounding the regulation of social media platforms. The review aims to reflect the current academic observations within this area to gain a better understanding of the case of *‘Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis’* and to establish the foundational knowledge for the theoretical framework presented in the next section. The

insights mentioned reflect only a small fraction of the extensive research on this topic but are specifically relevant to this thesis and the pre-understandings developed throughout.

**Keywords:** *Power dynamics, Discourse analysis, Congressional hearings, Big Tech CEOs, social media regulation, Digital sphere, Platform governing, social media governance, Foucault and governance.*

For this literature review, the search engine employed is Primo-Aalborg University, an internal site for students providing access to materials from Aalborg University Library and the Medical Library of Aalborg, as well as selected research databases (Primo-Aalborg University, n.d.).

## **2.1 Governance of social media platforms**

When reviewing the literature on social media governance, two main perspectives emerge. One considers governance as a governmental phenomenon (Lee et al, 2023; Flew, 2015; Celeste et al, 2023; Bayer 2021) while the other views it as a corporate regulatory phenomenon (Zarsky, 2014; DeNardis & Hackl, 2015; Parker et al, 2019).

When examining literature falling under the category of 'governance as governmental,' Celeste et al. (2023) argues that a primary challenge in global social media governance is related to achieving worldwide consensus on the regulations regarding governing online content moderation. While the international law of human rights is commonly cited in discussions of governance, it is argued that social media platforms diverge from these principles. Instead, they enforce their own rules, which may not align with the protection of individual human rights. According to Celeste et al, international law only establishes general principles that cannot be directly applied to online content moderation (Celeste et al., 2023, pp. 1-2). The authors further argue that social media companies face several dilemmas when it comes to governing content online, including whether to follow the private norms of users implicitly moderated by themselves or to adhere to democratically voted laws, and whether to apply national or international standards (Celeste et al., 2023, p. 12). The dilemma regarding national/international is not only limited to social media, but a question which has become increasingly relevant with globalization and the spread of the internet in the post-modern society (Celeste et al, 2023). When examining the governance of social media from a governmental perspective, the distinction between international laws and national laws becomes even more apparent. Research focusing on social media governance under international laws often addresses rights such as the right to privacy (Kuner, 2024; Andoh & Godderis, 2019; Nadezhda & Leenes, 2023), freedom of speech (Wagner, 2016; Smith, 2022; Mills, 2015), and gender-based violence (Sjöholm, 2022;

Panday 2023; Suzor et al., 2019), emphasizing human rights as a focal point of international institutions. When considering governance from a national perspective, human rights also play a significant role. For instance, in the study of free speech in the US by Demaske (2021), attention is directed toward the role of the First Amendment in everyday speech and online platforms, exploring its limitations. Furthermore, another aspect that emerges is that of nation-state sovereignty 'AI nationalism' (Spence, 2019; Economist, 2024), referring to the competition between the US and China over AI governance which implicitly also becomes a fight between two ideologies. 'Digital sovereignty' (Pohle & Thiel, 2020; Chander & Sun, 2023), research focusing on a nation's control over its own technology, and 'Cybersecurity' (Maglaras et al., 2021), with focus on national security in the fight against foreign cyber threats. Several scholars (Bromell, 2022; Padovani, 2024; Johnston & Pieczka, 2019) also view governance from both international and national perspectives, and thus take a comparative stand. Akdeniz (2008) compares the US, EU, and global governance responses to internet child pornography. He notes that although harmonization between national and international organizations in this field is developing, both should look to the internet industry for assistance and guidance in the fight against child pornography, underscoring the need for both parties to be involved in governing the digital sphere (Akdeniz, 2008, p. 226).

Zarsky (2014) offers insights into the governance of social media platforms from the private companies' perspective, illuminating both their benefits and challenges. Social media can serve as a platform for promoting important social objectives, but it also entails the risk of generating harms through speech-related content. It stands in contrast to other forms of media, such as TV or radio, which have traditionally been subjected to comprehensive regulatory frameworks. On social media, the regulatory framework pertains to private entities, and applying governmental regulations to such entities is a complex task (Zarsky, 2014, p. 161). Social media companies can engage in governance through several levels. The first and most prominent is their control of the technological architecture through code, which they can alter at will. For instance, companies can limit the possibility for interaction between users, dictate what they engage in, or regulate the information they can review or distribute. Users formally accept this control through the Terms of Use, essentially granting platforms the right to govern their content and immunizing the platforms from claims regarding legitimacy (Zarsky, 2014, p. 155). However, the problem with governance through code and contracts lies in the power granted to a small management team. This private actor gains the authority to dispute and limit harms, potentially establishing rules that regulate social discourse. This issue becomes particularly apparent when these rules affect users' rights to free speech or invoke privacy concerns. Even though

those responsible for governing these rules may be talented and well-educated, they are also driven by financial incentives and seek to enhance their companies' financial outcomes (Zarsky, 2014, p. 156). Furthermore, another aspect can be seen in the term 'surveillance capitalism,' which is used to describe the power that corporations gain over individuals through data extraction and analysis (Zuboff, 2019). In this form of capitalism, human behavior is converted into data, which can be utilized to predict, modify, and ultimately control individuals' actions. The corporate digital elite can employ this data to protect themselves economically and politically against both public and private interests. In surveillance capitalism, corporations gain power through access to phones and computers, which provide further insights into data such as GPS locations, health information, and face recognition technologies (Ferreira, 2022, p. 274). Furthermore, according to Nyabola (2023), social media platforms have the potential to undermine democracy and shed light on the global challenges of regulation. Initially viewed with great optimism as spaces for global connectivity and the building of organic communities, these platforms also harbor the potential power to undermine democracy. The problem is that these sites offer visibility and influence on a large audience through money. Well-funded negative actors capitalize on these capabilities of the sites, using the networks to spread misinformation and generate disproportionate political influence. This creates a challenge for regulators, as they must balance the positive aspects of these sites with the negatives (Nyabola, 2023, p. 456). Social media platforms are part of a multilateral, geopolitical landscape that enables them to impact relationships between states and non-state actors. The knowledge generated on sites like X by politicians and journalists regularly impacts news channels all over the world. While the sites help politicians share viewpoints and reach large audiences, all profit still goes to the companies. The discourses generated through these sites thus transcend economic metrics, and their value lies in their ability to influence (Nyabola, 2023, p. 460). Because these sites pose complex problems, it is important for regulators to not only focus on the rights of individuals but also to view these platforms from a holistic perspective, considering both their positive and negative implications for democracy (Nyabola, 2023, p. 467).

When examining digital governance, Dawson (2023) delves deeper into the means for holding actors accountable. Within the concept of accountability lies the capacity to demand explanations from policymakers, representing a modern form of justification wherein actions are taken only upon the foundation of good reasoning (Dawson, 2023, p. 78). Within the digital sphere, regulation has often been lacking over the years. However, with the increasing emphasis on accountability, evidenced by developments such as US congressional hearings on companies and the incorporation of various

accountability measures into terms of use agreements, there can be seen a rise in demand for accountability. A concern when subjecting the digital sphere to central public control is that it could threaten the perception of the internet as a space without domination and free from central political control. There is also fear that regulation will limit growth and innovation (Dawson, 2023, p. 79). When examining cooperation, the question of whether it is advisable for those wielding power to assume responsibility, as this might not be conducive to fostering transparency and accountability. The same applies for international and national actors, and Dawson therefore argues for a normative framework to be made, that would allow actors to distinguish between different forms of digital accountability (Dawson, 2023, p. 79-81).

In summary, the literature on social media governance highlights the challenges present in both governmental and corporate approaches. Achieving consensus on regulations, balancing human rights and sovereignty concerns, and navigating the complexities of regulating private entities are central themes. The next section delves deeper into how discourse analysis is used to further explore the governance of social media from various perspectives.

## **2.2 Discourse and power**

This thesis utilizes critical discourse analysis. The main area of analysis is conducted by examining discourses in the case of 'Big Tech in Congress 2024.' It is therefore relevant to explore how discourse theory is approached from different scholarly viewpoints and further utilized in relation to the study of social media.

Discourse analysis is a broad term encompassing different academic perspectives such as sociology, psychology, cultural studies, political science, and international relations (Chalaby, 1996; Wiggins, 2017; Scollo, 2011; Pedersen, 2009; Holzscheiter, 2014). The interpretation of discourse can vary depending on the academic perspective adopted. When analyzing discourse from a purely linguistic and semantic standpoint, the emphasis lies on the grammatical structures or functions within the discourse, essentially regarding discourse as synonymous with language (Chalaby, 1996, p. 684). Cook (1996) defines discourse as: "*Language in use, for communication is called discourse; and the search for what gives discourse coherence is discourse analysis*" (Cook, 1996, p. 6). He further argues that while language can be studied purely grammatically, understanding the meaning behind a sentence, as communicated through language, necessitates analysis within discourses (Cook, 1996, pp. 6-7). A discourse can be studied through various empirical methods, such as examining it as either a speech act, as in the case of Buzan et al.'s framework of securitization (Buzan et al., 2001, p.

31), or as a text analyzed within the theoretical framework proposed by van Dijk (van Dijk, 1988, p. 140). However, discourses are often presented in various forms such as speech, video, and textual pieces, where language is perceived more as symbols rather than being strictly tied to a specific linguistic structure. This approach is often seen in multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) where text and image can be analyzed in relation to each other (Norris, 2019, p. 19). Within the realm of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), discourse is recognized as a social phenomenon that encompasses power relations, structural dominance, and control mechanisms evident in both spoken and written language. CDA also views discourses as socially constitutive and conditioned, thereby linking the analysis to the social context in which it occurs (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 448).

When examining governance and discursive approaches, various theoretical lenses appear to be employed in existing literature. Zukerstein (2015) introduces a framework for studying governmental foreign policies, drawing from the interdisciplinary fields of history, political science, and logistics, through the lens of discursive legitimation. The focus is on how language helps legitimize something, in this context, the US foreign policy strategies. The premise of legitimization mechanisms such as 'us and them', 'oversimplifying', 'rationalizing', and so on, can be found when examining the discourses presented (Zukerstein, 2015, pp. 292-294). Chiang (2015) links discourse to power, to showcase how discourse and power can be and are studied in relation to each other. Power can be defined as "*A person's ability to influence the behaviors of other people (usually against their will)*" (Chiang, 2015, p. 1). The discussion of power can be seen through various theoretical approaches, with some of the most well-known being Marx and Engels on power, Weber and his view on authority, and Foucault on the exercise of power (Chiang, 2015, p. 2). Several studies (Basu, 2019; Wu et al., 2021; Maes & Van Hootegeem, 2022) explore power through the lens of discourses. An example of this is presented by Pantzerhielm et al. (2020), who studied how norms of good governance are reflected in international organizations associated with global health. They demonstrate how discourses on governance and power values are reflected through the relationships between institutions, highlighting their structural interdependencies and their impacts on each other (Pantzerhielm et al., 2020, p. 413). Similarly, Perna et al. (2019) employ CDA within the framework of power and discourse to examine how legislators exert power to influence the roles and contributions of academic researchers during congressional hearings. Their research reveals that legislators wield power in determining whether and when academic researchers testify in hearings (Perna et al., 2019, p. 123). Additionally, the study finds that congressional legislators also exert

power by acquiring prior knowledge of the expertise of witnesses through pre-interviews, enabling them to steer the conversation in a direction that best serves their argument (Perna et al., 2019, p. 125)

Moreover, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) is a widely recognized method of analyzing discourse, which places special emphasis on the relationship between power and language (Powers, 2007, p. 25). This thesis utilizes Foucault as a lens to understand power dynamics found within the discourses concerning social media governance and protection strategies for children during the 2024 congressional hearing on big tech. Therefore, it becomes relevant to examine how Foucault has been applied by different scholars within the field of social media governance. When looking at the research area, it becomes apparent that the studies employing Foucault rarely focus specifically on the governance of social media platforms at the legislative level. Instead, the analytical focus is often on the users' internal formation of discourses. An example of this can be found in the study of Cheung and Chen (2022), which, drawing on Foucault's notion of power, showcases how social media, as it has become an integral part of everyday life, has reshaped users' understanding of privacy and concern for individual rights, in turn reshaping the relationship between individuals and big tech companies (Cheung and Chen, 2022, p. 467). By placing the users' privacy on Facebook in the context of a power relationship with the platform, the study revealed that there was a paradox between how the users were concerned about their online privacy but did not act accordingly. The need for forming online relationships and maintaining friendships often outweighed this concern (Cheung and Chen, 2022, p. 479-480). Another study employs the concept of Foucault's 'the technique of self' to show how technologies such as social media, can be seen as a form of self-formation tool. Underscoring the point that formation of the tools nudge users to constantly update publicly on their everyday life, and that a focus should be on how these tools are governed as they impact modern communication forms (Sauter, 2014, pp. 835-836). Beresford (2023) applies Foucault's theory of governance to examine the deterrence of internet fraud online, arguing that pure governmental control over the internet has been insufficient. However, by examining the relationships and power dynamics within the internet, underlying ways of deterring internet fraud can be found among cooperative initiatives and online users (Beresford, 2023, pp. 82-83).

Shifting the focus from social media, the Foucauldian perspective is frequently applied in broader examinations of modern governance, emphasizing the manifestation of power through language. Similarly, on a legislative level, this perspective is evident, yet it directs attention towards governance at large, rather than the influence of social media and Big Tech in academic papers (Nordberg, 2017; Pennington, 2023; Wimberly, 2020). An example of this can be found in the examination of

authoritarian state figures, exemplified by the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States. Through the lens of governmentality, it becomes apparent that there has been a notable deviation from governance rooted in truth and factual integrity. This departure is vividly demonstrated by the unprecedented events surrounding the storming of the United States Capitol Building, incited by Trump's dissemination of misinformation regarding election fraud through speeches and social media posts (Nordberg, 2017, p. 3-4). In a study examining the shift of discourse from competition towards internationalization in the US, researchers explored how FDA delineates the regimes of truth and practice within the higher education context in the US (Deuel, 2021, p. 878). They illustrate the evolution of discourse over a 30-year period among educational practitioners, highlighting internationalization as the prevailing regime of truth, fostering global engagement and mobility among universities (Deuel, 2021, pp. 888-889).

In summary, discourse analysis provides a lens to examine power dynamics and governance practices across academic disciplines. The existing literature reflects various methodological approaches within discourse analysis, including text and language analysis, as well as the methodological lens of CDA employed in this thesis. When considering the theoretical approaches taken within this framework, FDA stands out for its exploration of the intricate relationship between language and power. In the following section, the theoretical framework of this thesis is presented which will serve as the theoretical lens taken in the analysis.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

The problem formulation aims to address the negotiation of accountability among congressional members, social media companies, and individuals, as well as the underlying power dynamics involved in governing social media and protecting children online. To address these inquiries, two theoretical perspectives will be drawn upon. The first perspective is derived from the article *'The Accountability of Non-Governmental Actors in the Digital Sphere: A Theoretical Framework'* (2022) by Mark Dawson. This framework will be used to understand how accountability in social media governance is employed through constructed discourse and how these reflections align with normative goods of openness, non-arbitrariness, effectiveness, and/or publicness. The second perspective draws on Michel Foucault's understanding of power through the two concepts of disciplinary power (1991) and biopower (2020) to gain better insight into the power dynamics

employed between actors as seen through constructed discourses. Both presented and conceptualized in the following section.

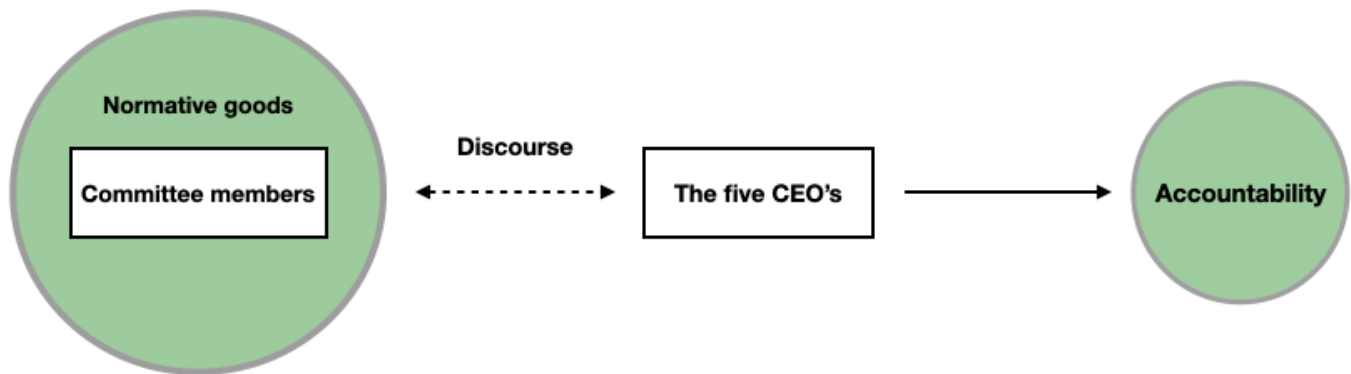
### **3.1 Accountability within the digital sphere**

As accounted for in the literature review, social media governance contains a need for holding both social media companies and policymakers accountable (Ilori, 2021; Dawson, 2023). To assess how the actors in the hearing are taking moral and ethical accountability in safeguarding children online, a general framework of four normative goods presented by Mark Dawson will be drawn upon throughout (Dawson, 2022). Dawson is a professor of European Law and Governance at the Hertie School in Berlin. His research primarily focuses on the EU, European politics, and policymaking (Hertie School, n.d.). He has published several works regarding governance in the 21st century, including *The Governance of EU Fundamental Rights* (2017), *New Modes of Governance* (2016), and a chapter titled "The Role of Law in Multilevel Governance: Four Conceptualizations" (2021).

In the theoretical framework on accountability, Dawson (2022) defines accountability as "*A promise to justify without committing to a particular response to justification*" (Dawson, 2022, p. 79). The definition implies that an individual can willingly explain their actions, but without an official promise to change their behavior based on that explanation. According to Dawson, accountability becomes especially relevant when examining governance in the digital sphere, as is the case in this thesis. In the digital sphere, there is, on the one hand, a need for more control, to for example ensure children are more protected, on the other hand, a fear that too much control would threaten users' democratic rights such as free speech and freedom to act, making it hard for social media companies to regulate (Dawson, 2022, p. 79). Accountability, therefore, becomes a potential middle ground solution for policymakers and companies alike, enabling the public to, at a minimum, demand that those who exercise digital power explain their actions (Dawson, 2022, p. 79-80).

When applying the framework presented by Dawson, it is assumed that the actors within the hearing already have accountability duties, which will then be identified through the four normative goods presented below. The congressional hearing can be viewed as what Dawson calls an accountability forum, wherein there is a duty to ask questions that can either contest or confirm whether standards are met (Dawson, 2022, p. 83). The roles within the hearing are such that the committee members have called for a meeting to question the five CEOs of the social media platforms on behalf of the

public, and therefore they are going to address the accountability claims demanded of them. The four normative goods represent the public norms to which the committee members refer through their discourses within the hearing, which will be analyzed through CDA.



Model 2: Construction of accountability

In Model 2, the conceptualization of accountability is visualized. The green circles depict the relationship between the committee members and the five CEOs, which is continually constructed through the hearing, as shown by the double-sided arrow. This depiction aligns with a social constructivist perspective, where accountability is understood as a product of social interactions rather than an inherent quality. The committee members, by asking questions based on the public's normative goods, actively participate in the construction of accountability. In this view, the public's normative goods serve as a framework that shapes and guides the interactions, enabling the CEOs to be held accountable within this social context. Even though these norms are mainly constructed within the hearing, by bringing in YouTube comments on the hearing, there will be an additional layer of analysis that can help determine whether this accountability is successful, and whether the normative goods are reflected in the discourses formed by online users on YouTube.

### 3.1.1 Four normative goods

Dawson presents four normative goods of openness, non-arbitrariness, effectiveness, and publicness, which can be used in order to measure the form of accountability taken by the five CEOs on behalf of their social media companies. These four goods will be drawn upon throughout the analysis, and will be understood based on the following conceptualization:

Openness refers to the expectation of the public for the actors to be transparent of their actions. Making it possible for the public to judge whether actors have reasonable argumentation for their actions. The CEOs of the social media companies then will be perceived as more accountable, the more they inform about their decisions and its reasoning behind it (Dawson, 2022, p. 83-85).

Non-arbitrariness refers to how and in what manner actors wield their power. It rests on the notion that those who hold public power and exercise coercion should do so in a limited manner. Actors should not act arbitrarily, meaning randomly or without reason, and should only use power when necessary to achieve legitimate goals. In the context of holding CEOs accountable, this entails ensuring that their regulations and policies for keeping children safe online are informed by relevant expert knowledge and are implemented in a manner that respects the rights of children and adults (Dawson, 2022, p. 85-86)

Effectiveness refers to the way actors achieve public goals. The actors will be asked to account for their efforts to improve and to reflect on the implementation of measures taken on their platforms. The CEOs will be asked to assess whether they have effectively regulated their platforms to ensure safety for children, and if they can fulfill the role of a regulatory authority (Dawson, 2022, p. 86-87).

Publicness refers to whether the actors are acting on behalf of the best interests of the public good. This involves demonstrating that they did not gain any personal benefits from their regulations and that they took into account the social interest in their decisions. The CEOs will thus be asked to defend their own conduct and whether the steps taken to protect children online have been based on the public interest, or if they, for example, valued financial gains higher.

The presented framework of normative goods aims to help uncover how accountability is negotiated among actors, first in the congressional hearing between committee members and the five CEOs, and secondly through the YouTube comments on the hearing. To understand the underlying power dynamics found at both levels of analysis, an additional theoretical perspective of Michel Foucault's notion of power will be introduced in the next section.

## 3.2 Power Dynamics

In the following section, Michel Foucault's notion of power dynamics will be conceptualized in relation to this thesis, specifically drawing on Disciplinary Power from his book '*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*' (1991) and Biopower from his collection of lectures '*Society Must Be Defended*' (2020). Adopting a Foucauldian perspective, this thesis examines the power dynamics between committee members, the five CEOs, and YouTube users in the governance of social media platforms in 2024. Foucault's analysis emphasizes the role of power relations, discourses, and knowledge production in shaping social reality (Mills, 2003, p. 1)

### 3.2.1 Conceptualizing Foucault

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was a Professor of the History of Thought at the Collège de France in Paris (Foucault, 2020). He is regarded as one of the most influential thinkers within critical theory and has had a massive impact across disciplinary fields such as history, philosophy, and sociology (Mills, 2003, p. 1). Foucault does not offer a clear framework for analysis; instead, he has published several works such as '*The History of Sexuality, Volume I*' (1978), '*Discipline and Punish*' (1975/1991), and '*Madness and Civilization*' (1964/2007), in which he display how, among other things, power and knowledge are produced through institutions and society, shaping phenomena such as sexuality, discipline, and madness (Mills, 2003, p. 1-2). Foucault's work often interconnects, and a concept is frequently mentioned and sometimes further developed depending on the specific work chosen (Mills, 2003, p. 3). Therefore, it becomes essential to present the key understandings of Foucault and show how this thesis aligns with or differs from his original works, which is done continually throughout this theoretical framework.

When examining Foucault's work, Koopman and Matza note that his ideas can be understood through different modes, shaping various theoretical lenses. These modes include structural analysis, hermeneutic interpretations, and systematic philosophy (Koopman & Matza, 2013, p. 825). Foucault himself opposed traditional forms of the philosophy of science and proposed alternative perspectives where the lines between subject and objective reality were less clear. Instead, he viewed reality as continually shaped by discourses, knowledge, and truth, particularly from a historical perspective (Lui et al., 2009, pp. 585-586). In this thesis, the adopted approach is social constructivism, referring to the perspective that knowledge and reality are socially created through language (Berger & Luckmann, 2011, p. 35). This entails examining how actors within the hearing and in the comment, sections construct realities by negotiating how social media should be regulated. The philosophical

perspective taken, further outlined in the methodology section, aligns with Foucault's central views. Both Foucault and social constructivism see reality as shaped by social processes. Foucault views reality as shaped by discourses and knowledge from a historical standpoint, whereas social constructivism sees it as shaped through language and interaction, in this thesis reflecting contemporary understandings. By adopting a social constructivist lens, this thesis explores how power dynamics and discourses influence the governance of social media platforms, resonating with Foucault's emphasis on the construction of reality through social processes.

In identifying power dynamics in this thesis analysis, two concepts, Disciplinary Power and Biopower, will be utilized. These concepts are multifaceted, each encompassing multiple elements. The below table provide an overview of concepts conceptualized and their respective sources.

Source	Concept	Mode
The Archeaology of knowledge (2002)		Power/knowlegde and discourse
Society must be defended (2020)	Biopower <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biopolitics</li> <li>• State racism</li> </ul>	Power/knowlegde
Discipline and punish: The birth of a prison (1991)	Disciplinary power <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Panopticism</li> </ul>	

Table 2: Concept overview

Table 2 is organized into three columns: source, concept, and mode, providing an overview of the conceptualization of Foucault's main concepts in this thesis. In Foucault's works, modes like power/knowledge and discourse serve as frameworks for describing phenomena, while concepts such as pansophism are grounded in empirical terms (Koopman & Matza, 2013, p. 824)

### 3.2.2 Discourse and power/knowledge

In analyzing power dynamics from a Foucauldian perspective, it becomes essential to understand Foucault's views on discourse, power, and knowledge in general. His approach focuses on how power operates through different practices and mechanisms, such as discipline and biopower, within society. The following section presents how the mode of power/knowledge, as visualized in Table 2, is utilized in relation to this thesis.

In the book 'Archeology of Knowledge,' discourse is closely tied to language, both written and spoken (Foucault, 2002, p. 26). A discourse, according to Foucault is a statement that can only be understood in the time it occurred and is based on prior events or statements leading up to it (Foucault, 2002, p. 30). Foucault raises the question, "*What is this specific existence that emerges from what is said and nowhere said?*" (Foucault, 2002, p. 31). When studying discourses, the aim is to look beyond what is being said, thus reading between the lines of an actual statement. Foucault argues that power can be found embedded within a discourse because a statement can never be neutral; it is always built upon a specific position in a network of meaning extending beyond it (Foucault, 2002, p. 112). Furthermore, a statement becomes a form of power when examining the domain in which it is used or applied, the roles and functions it can perform, and the time it is being said (Foucault, 2002, p. 116). In 'Discipline and Punish,' Foucault displays how power and knowledge can be viewed as interconnected phenomena. In this sense, power operates through the production of knowledge and the pursuit of truth.

*"We should admit that rather than power producing knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful), power and knowledge directly imply one another: that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations "* (Foucault, 1991, p. 27).

Therefore, according to Foucault, power/knowledge should be viewed as one. Power relations create knowledge, and vice versa, constructing reality due to their interconnected nature. The relationship between power and knowledge makes it possible for a subject to either use or resist power; it is in the shaping of this relationship that such possibilities emerge (Foucault, 1991, p. 28).

Building on this framework, this thesis employs Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which perceives discourses as influenced by linguistic, discursive, and societal features (Fairclough, 2006, p. 73), contrasting with Foucault's perspective on discourses, which emphasizes their connection to preceding historical events (Foucault, 2002, p. 30). Foucault's concepts will be applied as part of the social dimension of analysis, particularly his views on power and knowledge, which will be utilized in analyzing discourses constructed between committee members, CEOs, and users of YouTube. Part of the analysis is then to identify the knowledge and embedded truths shaping the governance and regulation of social media platforms. By doing this, the aim is to analyze how power operates through these mechanisms. Furthermore, a focus will be on how these discourses contribute

to shaping reality by legitimizing certain forms of knowledge and marginalizing others. In constructing this reality, the use or resistance of power, should become evident in the negotiation between the actors, highlighting the dualistic understanding of power and knowledge in shaping governance.

### **3.2.3 Disciplinary power**

In the book *'Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison'*, Foucault displays how discipline functions through punishments and regulations imposed on society as mechanisms of power (Foucault, 1991). Foucault defines discipline as a form of power that shapes individuals, groups, and society as a whole. This influence is evident in institutions like schools, where children are socialized to obey authority (Foucault, 1991, p. 158). However, discipline goes beyond institutional boundaries; it affects individuals across multiple levels:

*“‘Discipline’ cannot be equated with any single institution or apparatus; it represents a type of power, a method of its exercise, encompassing an array of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, and targets; it embodies a ‘physics’ or an ‘autonomy’ of power and technology”* (Foucault, 1991, p. 215).

Thus, discipline is not confined to specific institutions like schools or prisons; it is instead an intricate aspect of society. It is a power that operates independently from the individuals and institutions that wield it and is exercised through various techniques and mechanisms. Individuals are disciplined to be part of society through internalization processes, shaped by knowledge and truth regimes that make up the reality they live in and are a part of (Foucault, 1991, p. 194). In examining how the regulation of social media is negotiated by committee members, CEOs, and YouTube users, disciplinary power can be found within the discourses formed among them. As Foucault argues, discipline is not tied to any single institution, meaning that in contemporary society, the regulation and governance of social media do not only take the form of laws and formal punishment but also encompass how actors believe they should behave online and the truth regimes they draw upon, particularly in protecting children. Regulation can thus be seen as a part of discipline, but discipline is already present in the internalized self-regulating understandings, as evidenced in this thesis through the constructed reality among these entities.

### 3.2.3.1 Panopticism

According to Foucault, disciplinary power can be found excised through various techniques and mechanisms (Foucault, 1991, p. 215). His concept of panopticism, a metaphorical picture of surveillance techniques (Foucault, 1991, p. 200), becomes especially relevant when analyzing the case of inquiry in this thesis. Surveillance becomes evident on multiple levels in the regulation of social media platforms, such as in companies collecting user data (D’Annunzio & Menichelli, 2022, p. 572-573), the design of social media as public spaces for social interaction (Li & Xie, 2002), and the live streaming of congressional hearings on platforms like YouTube (U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2024).

Drawing on the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, Foucault employs the description of a panopticon to illustrate how surveillance acts as a form of punishment and control over subjects (Foucault, 1991, p. 200). A panopticon, a prison design, placing supervisors in a central tower, allowing for constant observation of the cells around it. Although supervisors cannot observe all the cells at the same time, inmates cannot see them and do not know when they are being watched: *“The arrangement of his room, opposite the central tower, imposes him on an axil availability; but the division of the ring, those separated cells, imply a lateral invisibility. And this indivisibility is a guarantee of order.”* (Foucault, 1991, p. 200). This invisibility creates constant observation, making the inmates act as though they are constantly being observed.

While the panopticon is described as a prison, Foucault conceptualizes it as a metaphorical tool found within society to discipline, control, and observe. Detached from physical structures such as a prison, it can be described as a mechanism that: *“(...) act directly on individuals; it gives ‘power of mind over mind’*” (Foucault, 1991, p. 206). Applied to society, individuals become mutual supervisors who observe each other and are observed simultaneously: *“The seeing machine was once a sort of a dark room, into which individual spied; it has become an transparent building in which the excises of power may be supervised by society as a whole”* (Foucault, 1991, p. 207). YouTube can be viewed as a modern ‘seeing machine’ or panopticon, where the users can observe each other and through comments, negotiate and construct realities of discipline. The platform also enables users to watch congressional hearings, where committee members and CEOs discuss regulations of social media platforms. Consequently, the courtroom becomes a space society watches, allowing actors to impact

users by negotiating knowledge and truths. Additionally, the public can observe them, applying an invisible form of constant observation that compels the actors to act accordingly.

### **3.1.2 Biopower**

In the collection of lectures given by Foucault between 1975-76 and gathered in the book 'Society Must Be Defended', Foucault illustrates how society is governed through concepts such as biopower (Foucault, 2020).

Biopower is, according to Foucault, a form of power that is exercised over populations rather than individuals. It is a form of power where control over life is exerted. This concept stands in contrast to sovereign power, which operates through domination and the threat of punishment, including the right to kill. Biopower operates through mechanisms and technologies whose most basic function is to ensure life (Foucault, 2020, p. 253-254). This concept becomes relevant to the case of inquiry when analyzing the discourses constructed by committee members, who, in representing the U.S. Congress, can exercise forms of biopower through the negotiation and implementation of laws concerning the U.S. population (Judiciary.senate, n.d.).

A mechanism of biopower is biopolitics, where politics are employed to ensure the longevity of the population. These policies are implemented to ensure economic growth through a healthy workforce. Therefore, the focus shifts to optimizing individuals' states of life to ensure a healthy mass population, achieved through policies that promote a higher birthrate or similar statistical-based measures benefiting the population (Foucault, 2020, p. 246). Biopower can thus be seen employed through biopolitics, in regulations or laws that classify individuals into population groups and are framed as benefiting the health and well-being of the entire population, or in the context of this case, through the discourses constructed during the hearing. By drawing on statistical arguments such as birth rate, mortality rate, and health statistics, which pertain to the discipline of the body, biopolitics can help reinforce what is considered normal in society (Foucault, 2020, p. 253). The knowledge and truths regarding this kind of power will then draw on statistical arguments pertaining to populations and their control.

### 3.1.2.1 State racism

Foucault argues that state-racism is a part of the normalization of society. In protecting the life of its population, the state positions itself against others to further highlight why it is superior to others (Foucault, 2020, p. 257). Racism allows biopower to work, as it proposes and ‘us’ and ‘them’ narrative, where an ultimate race is found:

*“We are dealing with a mechanism that allows biopower to work. So, racism is bound up with the workings of the State that is obliged to use race, the elimination of races and the purification of race, to exists sovereignty. (Foucault, 2020, p. 258).*

When Foucault discusses state racism, he doesn't simply refer to it as an excuse for historical acts of murder seen in war. Instead, he views it as a form of indirect murder, which can also manifest as political death or rejection (Foucault, 2020, p. 256). Racism can be understood as part of the state's mechanisms for prioritizing its population over others. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, TikTok is the only non-American company and poses an economic threat to the country (see introduction). The normalization of society can thus be seen in the way TikTok is portrayed as an enemy of the state, reflecting an underlying political discourse toward China as the political and ideological opponent.

In summary, the theoretical framework outlined above provides a lens through which accountability is negotiated among actors, drawing on four normative goods. Additionally, it identifies the underlying power dynamics of disciplinary power and biopower in the discourses surrounding the governance of social media platforms in 2024. This framework presents two different theoretical insights, both of which are applied to situate discourses within the societal dimension throughout the analysis. The next section will delve into the methodological considerations undertaken in this thesis. It will, among other things, present the research design, data collection, and analysis processes, as well as discuss the relevance of the theoretical lens when applicable.

## 4. Methodological considerations

The following section presents the methodological considerations taken in this thesis. First, the philosophical considerations from both ontological and epistemological perspectives are presented, followed by a description of the research design, case, and employed research criteria. Lastly, an insight into the analytical method of critical discourse analysis and its utilization in the thesis is

presented. Any findings presented in the later analysis should be understood as a product of the theoretical lens presented and the methodological considerations outlined.

## **4.1 Philosophy of science**

The theoretical framework presented will serve as a lens through which to interpret the findings of the analysis. This theoretical perspective incorporates the works of Dawson (2022) and Foucault (1991; 2020), all approached through the philosophical position of social constructivism.

Within the philosophical considerations of this thesis, two main positions can be distinguished. The first is the ontological position, which concerns with the question of what reality is (Goertz, 2012, p. 207), and the second is epistemology, which addresses how and what knowledge is used to understand reality (Goertz, 2012, p. 210). Both positions will be based interpreted from social constructivism, most attributed to Berger and Luckmann's book *'The Social Construction of Reality,'* wherein reality is perceived as a constructed by collective interactions and interpretations (Lynch, 2016, p. 1). The question of ontology and epistemology will be addressed in relation to the theoretical considerations and philosophical position taken throughout this thesis, as outlined below.

### **4.1.1 Ontology**

In social constructivism, reality is shaped and understood through collective interaction and communication. This means that reality cannot be regarded as an objective truth that exists independently of perceptions (Berger & Luckmann, 2011, p. 35). When studying actors, this philosophical stance considers other factors such as cultural backgrounds, language, and social context in interpreting the view on reality (Berger & Luckmann, 2011, p. 164). In relation to this thesis, this implies that the case is not seen as independent from its cultural place, time, and space, but rather that these factors significantly influence interpretation. The congressional hearing, used as a case, is based in America in the year 2024, and any discussions found will be interpreted based on this fact, as these two factors help understand how actors interpret reality.

In applying the theoretical lenses of Mark Dawson (2022) and Micheal Foucault (1991; 2002), social constructivism will be applied in viewing reality. In the article *'The accountability of non-governmental actors in the digitals sphere'* Dawson propose four normative goods to access accountability in the digital sphere. This theory proposes that accountability can be found contracted

among policies makes, and that these reflect societal norms of responsibility (Dawson, 2022, p. 80). The theory therefore rests on the ontological position of reality being constructed among actors, and in shaping accountability as something that can be found in the negotiation of it. This perspective therefor already aligns with the ontological understanding taken throughout this thesis. Where accountability will be viewed as constructed and reflected in the discourses drawn on among actors within the hearing. As argued for in the theoretical framework, Foucault view reality shaped by power/knowledge, truth and discourses, all of which is shaped by social interaction (Foucault, 1991, p. 28). By applying Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power and biopower, the focus will be on how these power dynamics shape the reality of actors and, consequently, the governance of social media in 2024.

#### **4.1.2 Epistemology**

Social constructivism, according to Berger and Luckmann, views knowledge as socially constructed and obtainable through the study of shared linguistic spaces:

*“Language, which may be defined here as a system of vocal signs, is the most important sign system of human society. (...) The common objectivations of everyday life are maintained primarily by linguistic signification. Everyday life is, above all, life with and by means of the language I share with my fellowmen”* (Berger & Luckmann, 2011, p. 51).

In other words, reality can be studied through spoken and written language, and through this analysis, signs of the system of society can be identified. They further emphasize that empirical research can be used to interpret everyday life and thereby gain an understanding of contemporary settings (Berger & Luckmann, 2011, pp. 209-210). The purpose then becomes to analyze the collective knowledge of reality as reflected in the discourses formed during the congressional hearing and in the comments, which will reveal a specific constructed view of the governing of social media platforms in 2024. In this thesis, knowledge is obtained through analyzing discourses following the three-dimensional model of Norman Fairclough, where discourse can be found through linguistic, discursive, and societal dimensions (Fairclough, 2006, p. 73). The theoretical lens is applied in the societal dimension to analyze how the discourses reflect the negotiation of accountability among users and how power dynamics influence the constructed reality. According to Dawson, accountability can be found in language. In describing how to view accountability through the norm of openness, he writes: “In the

digital sphere, therefore, a digital decision-maker is open if they are transparent about their decision” (Dawson, 2022, 83), thereby arguing that knowledge can be found in the words of a decision-maker, but also implying that being open is essential for accountability, which can only be assessed collectively. Aligning with the epistemological social constructivist position taken in this thesis, Foucault posits that knowledge is not merely a collection of facts and truths but is also part of the structures of power that influence what is accepted as truth within society (Foucault, 2002, p. 112). When viewed through social constructivism, the focus becomes on analyzing discourses to uncover these power dynamics.

## 4.2 Research design

The thesis adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing narrative data instead of numerical data as the empirical material encompassing a transcription of a congressional hearing and social media data (Verhoef & Casebeer, 1997, p. 65). The focus of the analysis is to gain insight into the discourses surrounding online safety regulations for children within the case of *'Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis'*. Specifically, the study seeks to illuminate how these discourses reflect the negotiation of accountability and the underlying power dynamics among the US Congress, social media companies, and individuals in 2024. To delve into this topic, the thesis employs a single case study. A case study can be defined as “An examination of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, politics, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically using one or more methods” (Thomas, 2011, p. 513) In other words, a case represents a focused examination of a specific phenomenon. This definition underscores the holistic approach to researching a case, implying that the same phenomenon can be explored from various perspectives using different methodological approaches. In this thesis, the single case in focus is the congressional hearing, which is analyzed through transcripts of the spoken words within the hearing and through collected YouTube comments related to the event. Below is an in-depth description of the case, including a description of the empirical data utilized, as well as ethical considerations relating to the data.

## 4.3 Case description

In this case, two different forms of empirical data are utilized: the first being a transcript of the congressional hearing, which involves written text produced from speech. The other form of data is YouTube comments, representing online users' short reactive texts. All empirical data relate to the

case, as the YouTube comments are reactions to the congressional hearing, and the analyzed comments relate to the discourses negotiated throughout. The data comprise two different forms of text, contextual settings, and require different considerations regarding data gathering and ethical considerations, all of which will be discussed in the following sections.

#### **4.3.1 Congressional records and transcriptions**

The main empirical data utilized in this thesis consists of a transcription from the full committee hearing on '*Big Tech and the online child sexual exploitation crisis*,' which took place on January 31st, 2024, under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary (U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2024). The hearing was published in video format on both the website congress.gov and the website of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary. The description on congress.gov provides access to insights and information about U.S. legislation: "*Official website for U.S federal legislative information. The site provides access to accurate, timely, and complete legislative information for members of Congress, legislative agencies, and the public*" (Congress.gov, 2019). The main material accessible through the two websites is a video of the hearing and five written testimonials provided from the five CEOs witnessing; an official transcript version provided from the congress is not included on the site (U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2024). Therefore the transcription of the hearing is obtained from the secondary source, written by Hendrix et al, and published on the site Tech Policy Press on February 1st, 2024 (Hendrix et al, 2024).

Müller and Damico argue that there are different ways of viewing a transcript, either as an integral part of data analysis or just as a product (Müller & Damico, 2002, p. 299). The transcript in this thesis falls into the latter category, viewing it as a product. A transcript can be described as an artifact that directly represents the behaviors produced by the speaker, however it those encompasses a series of judgments and choices regarding what to exclude or include (Müller & Damico, 2002, p. 300). Because the researcher of this thesis did not conduct the transcription, the video of the hearing was continually cross-referenced to ensure that all quotes were accurately included in the transcript and that essential information was not overlooked. Facial expressions and body language can assist in understanding the meaning of a statement if necessary (Müller & Damico, 2002, p. 300).

The transcription is included as Appendix A, it is 118 pages consists of a direct transcription of the hearing which lasted 3 hours and 50 minutes. In the analysis specific quotes are cited, including page

and line numbers for transparency. For any further inquiry, the empirical data can be found via their original sources, included in the transcript. The transcript is written based on the spoken words within the hearing. The transcription includes witness statements from the five social media CEOs: Mark Zuckerberg (Meta), Linda Yaccarino (X Corp), Shou Chew (TikTok Inc), Evan Spiegel (Snap Inc), and Jason Citron (Discord Inc) (U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2024; Appendix B, pp. 9-17). Opening statements by the committee leaders Dick Durbin and Lindsey Graham (Appendix B, pp. 5-9), followed by a series of questions from the other members of the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary (Appendix B: pp. 17-121). During the hearing, members have seven minutes to ask questions and receive answers from the witnesses. Members can grant additional time to each other if they deem it relevant (Congress.gov, n.d.).

#### **4.3.2 Social media data**

The second from of empirical data is gathered from the social media platform YouTube. Social media, in general, can serve as a valuable source for gathering information on public opinion and real-time events. Due to the large user base of these platforms, they provide a lot of data, although in some cases, additional sources are necessary to ensure triangulation such as interviews or observations to get a more an in-depth understanding of the data (Flick, 2022, p. 938). YouTube is a video-sharing platform where users with an account can upload videos that adhere to the platform's guidelines. Each video has a comment section where users can interact by commenting, liking, disliking, or replying to others' comments (YouTube Help, n.d).

The congressional hearing was livestreamed and later uploaded to YouTube by several sources, including global news media outlets. Different clips and outtakes were also uploaded, but only the full video hearings have been included in the data collection. Five YouTube channels were chosen based on highest number of views on a video, and thereby exposure. In the table below, an overview of the channels drawn from can be seen. The table includes insights into subscribers, comments made, views and a short description of the media outlets behind the channels:

Channel	Subscribers	Comments	Views	Media outlets
CBS News	5.8 million	646 comments	493.375	CBS News 24/7 is an American-based, globally accessible news outlet. (CBS News, 2024).
CNBC television	2,72 million	929 comments	165.055	CNBC, an American-based news outlet with a global focus on finance and news, operates with headquarters in both London and Singapore. (CNBC International, 2017)
Associated press	2.79 million	339 comments	103.551	The Associated Press is an independent news media outlet founded in the U.S. (Associated Press, 2018).

Table 3: YouTube channels

To gather empirical data in a systematic and transparent manner, a template was created. The filled-out version of this template is included as Appendix B and is referenced throughout the analysis by page number only. The criteria for the data collection were set; the comments collected were posted within the timeframe from the date of the posting of the congressional hearing 31/01/2024 to 30/05/2024 (4 months). Usernames were excluded to consider the privacy of users, as none of them had consented to their data being analyzed. Reactions such as likes and comments were included where relevant to show the interaction among users in the comment sections as well. The template for the collection of data looked as follows:

YouTube channel (name)	
Comment	Reaction
“...”  Likes:	Comment:
	Comment:
	Comment:
	Comment:

Table 4: Data collection template

Table 4 depicts the template used in the data collection, providing an overview of the selected data, both included and excluded. The main data collected consists of comment and likes, as well as reactions to that specific comment. Username and time have been excluded to not directly or indirectly quote the author of the post. Moreover, neither date of comment nor username has any purpose in the analysis and could therefore be excluded from the appendix.

#### **4.3.3 Ethical consideration**

In the case of the congressional records and transcripts employed, there was a lack of informed consent from the actors involved, meaning that the participants did not consent verbally or in writing to their statements or names being used in an analysis (Mirza et al, 2023, p. 443). However, the transcript used is made from publicly accessible video material uploaded to the official congress.gov who themselves provide material to be used by the public (Congress.gov, 2019). The participants in the videos know they are being filmed and have consented to being shared online, the hearing moreover consisting of a hearing on a specific topic regarding online child exploitation and no harmful personal data is shared which needs to be otherwise censored in this thesis.

In the case of the social media data employed from YouTube channels, a similar ethical concern of lack of consent can be found. When collecting data from social media platforms, two distinctions between public and private are made. YouTube is a public space in the sense that videos made public on the platform can be viewed, including comments, without creating a profile or joining a closed forum first. To comment, a user account is needed, but the users cannot be said to have given prior consent in their comments being collected or used in any other setting than of the comments section in which it was written (Universiteit Gent, 2024). That said, when utilizing quotes in the analysis, the specific username and timestamp of that comment have been censored. The information can still be found on the YouTube page, and it cannot be argued to be a fully anonymized process (Universiteit Gent, 2024). However, in the analysis, the focus is not on what the individual user writes or does, but rather any comment will be viewed as part of a reaction of a group, which can be categorized as an audience, social media user, or public, based on the process of employing discourse analysis.

## 4.4 Research Criteria

In quantitative research, metrics like validity, generalizability, reliability, and objectivity are commonly used, especially for analyzing numerical data and causal relationships. However, this thesis adopts a qualitative approach, emphasizing trustworthiness as a key factor in evaluating research quality. (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). The measurement considered in this study follows the theoretical approach proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which was further developed by Korstjens and Moser in their practical guide to qualitative research. This approach introduces five key criteria to ensure trustworthiness and measure quality in research findings: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, pp. 121-122). These points will be discussed later in this thesis, after presenting the findings, drawing on the choices made throughout the study, and examining whether the strategies used were appropriate or if alternative methods could have been employed to enhance the study's quality.

*Credibility:* Considering whether the research findings represent truth and how accurately the findings reflect the participants' views. Strategies include triangulation, which involves using different data collection methods to gain multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon, and persistent observation, where the researcher studies the data thoroughly until the final theory provides the intended depth of analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 122).

*Transferability:* To what extent can the results of the research be transferred to other contexts or settings? This involves the question of whether the researcher has provided thick descriptions of the research process and provided context, enabling the reader to make a judgment about transferability to other settings or studies (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 122).

*Reflectivity:* The process of self-reflection as a researcher, this measure refers to the subjective reflection of choices taken throughout the study, this includes biases, preferences, and preconception as well as any ethical considerations concerning the data collection (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121).

*Dependability and confirmability:* These measures are typically discussed after the publication of a paper, as they require external review. Dependability refers to participants' input on the study

afterward, and confirmability is concerned with whether the data and interpretations of the findings can be deemed correct by other researchers (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). However, these measures will not be considered, as the discussion takes its point of departure from the presented findings of the analysis and does not gain insight into the development of the findings over time.

## 4.5 Critical Discourse Analysis

The analysis is structured around Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse analysis. This methodological tool, presented in Fairclough's book *"Discourse and Social Change"* (2006, p. 73), will be used to analyze the discourses found within the congressional hearing and those formed by users on YouTube. Fairclough's methodological framework falls under the paradigm of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which aims to analyze the structural relationships of power and control manifested in language. CDA aims to study social interaction, which can be identified through various linguistic forms (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000, p. 448). CDA is therefore often applied to textual material, focusing on how power can be identified in the linguistic-discursive spectrum (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000, p. 448).

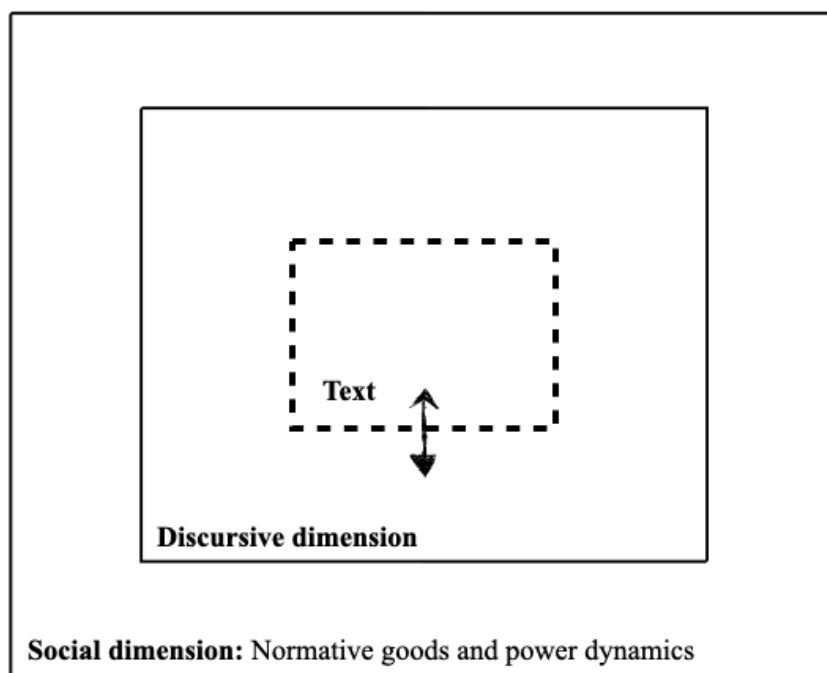
In this thesis, Fairclough's methodological approach will be applied to analyzing a transcript and collected YouTube comments, meaning that the main focus will be on textual pieces and their embedded meanings about the surrounding society. According to Fairclough, social structures should be in focus when identifying discourses: *"Discourse contributes to the constitution of all those dimensions of social structure which directly or indirectly shape and constrain it: its norms and conventions, as well as the relations, identities, and institutions which lie behind them"* (Fairclough, 2006, p. 64). Fairclough thereby views discourses as constituted by and continually shaping the social structures in which they are found.

Taking this understanding into account, the focus of this thesis is not only to identify but also to analyze how discourses concerning the regulation of social media platforms are both constrained by and continually shaped by norms and power structures, specifically in terms of how they are negotiated between actors. Additionally, the social constructivist perspective adopted in this thesis underscores the idea that discourses are co-created through interactions and negotiations among policymakers, tech companies, and users. This perspective highlights the importance of understanding the socio-linguistic processes that shape the regulation of social media platforms,

recognizing that language and discourse play crucial roles in constructing social realities and legitimizing certain viewpoints over others.

#### 4.5.1 A three-dimensional approach to analysis

Fairclough presents a comprehensive methodological framework to critically analyze discourse. This framework, known as the three-dimensional model, links the linguistic, discursive, and social dimensions of language to theory. This means that all three aspects are applied in analyzing discourse (Fairclough, 2006, p. 73). Below is a visual representation of the three-dimensional model, illustrating how the dimensions interconnect.



Model 3: “Three-dimensional conception of discourse” (Fairclough, 2006, p. 73)

The model depicts Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, with a few modifications made in accordance with this thesis. Firstly, the lines representing the textual dimension have been replaced with dotted lines, and an arrow has been added. This adjustment aims to illustrate that the dimensions of text and discourse are not sharply divided in the actual analysis; rather, the linguistic features of a text are also shaped by the discursive dimension it is a part of, and vice versa. Additionally, the theoretical lens is integrated into the depiction within the social practice aspect of the model, aligning with the theoretical framework of this thesis.

The analysis will be structured around this model, where the first part will focus on analyzing the textual and discursive features of a text, while the second part will situate the discourses in the social dimension through the theoretical lens. The analytical features drawn upon throughout will take their point of departure in Fairclough's approach presented below.

#### ***4.5.1.1 Textual analysis***

The first analytical approach is textual or linguistic analysis, wherein the focus is descriptive, examining the words used and the structure of sentences within the text (Fairclough, 2006, p. 74). According to Fairclough, four main categories can be drawn on in this analysis: vocabulary (focused on individual words), grammar (word-by-word and sentence structure), cohesion (how clauses and words are linked), and text structure (the large-scale organizational properties of the text) (Fairclough, 2006, p. 75). These categories are broad, and many different analytical tools could be employed when analyzing this level (Fairclough, 2006, p. 77). Therefore, three examples of Fairclough's techniques, word meaning, metaphors, and modality, will be described below and drawn upon in the analysis. Moreover, further linguistic features also described below will be included to ensure an in-depth analysis of the empirical material.

Word meaning: According to Fairclough words do not necessarily have a fixed meaning but can change, depending on the perspective therefore word meaning requires a form of interpretation (Fairclough, 2006, p. 190). Different words can be seen as a part of a connection to wider struggles or looking at the hegemonic relationship of words an example being 'American people', be set in relation to the 'state' or 'population' in some cases, changing depending on the meaning behind a statement (Fairclough, 2006, p. 77).

Metaphors: The second tool is that of metaphors, which, for Fairclough, is closely tied to the ideological and political import of certain metaphors as well as the conflict between them (Fairclough, 2006, p. 77). Fairclough gives the example of war metaphors because war has become so embedded in our daily discourse that it does not occur to people that it is a commonly used metaphorical feature. An example is 'he attacked all my arguments' or 'I am only defending myself' (Fairclough, 2006, p. 194-195).

Modality: The last linguistic analytics tool drawn from Fairclough is that of modalities, which he defines as "the dimension of the grammar of the clause that corresponds with the interpersonal

function of language." (Fairclough, 2006, p. 158). In other words, when looking at grammatical aspects such as verbs, pronouns in different tenses, and sentence structure, interpersonal functions of language can be identified. A modal can help identify who is speaking, how they feel, and how they relate to others. In identifying modals, Fairclough focuses on "modal auxiliary verbs," specifically words such as "must," "may," "can," "should," etc., in both past and present tenses. (Fairclough, 2006, p. 159-160).

In the textual analysis, a focus will furthermore be on various literary and rhetorical devices, namely symbols, irony, and the three rhetorical appeals of ethos, logos, and pathos. The understanding of these devices will be based on Dupriez's 'A Dictionary of Literary Devices'. Beginning with symbols, defined as gestures or objects imbued with cultural or traditional significance (Dupriez, 1991, p. 442), relating to this thesis a focus will be on their use in contemporary online communication, particularly in the form of emojis attached to YouTube comments, serving to convey specific non-verbal expressions (Was & Hamrick, 2021). Irony involves expressing something contrary to the intended meaning, often humorously (Dupriez, 1991, p. 243). Subsequently, the three rhetorical appeals will be drawn from. Ethos pertains to the credibility of the speaker or writer, pathos involves arguments that appeal to the emotions of the audience, and logos encompasses reasoning based on logic or factual evidence (Dupriez, 1991, p. 65).

#### **4.5.1.2 Discursive analysis**

The second dimension, discursive practice, involves the process of text production, distribution, and consumption, all of which vary according to the social settings in which they are found (Fairclough, 2006, p. 78). As mentioned, the distinction between analyzing text and analyzing discursive practice is vague. The goal is to identify a type of communication by examining both how it's written (like grammar and word choice) and how it's used in different situations and by different groups of people (Fairclough, 2006, p. 73). To analyze the discursive practice, Fairclough introduces several analytical tools and perspectives. The focus in this thesis will be only on his analytic tool of *the production of a text*, as it best relates to the genre of empirical data utilized in this thesis. When looking at the production of a text, the focus is on identifying the sender of the text and determining the intended audience, as well as how the text can or should be interpreted. This is done to establish the context of the text, to better position it in the social setting, and to gain a better understanding of the discourses (Fairclough, 2006, p. 79).

#### **4.5.1.3 Social dimension**

The third dimension, the social practice, is where the two previous dimensions are tied together. According to Fairclough, this dimension involves situating discourses within a broader theoretical perspective that considers their social implications (Fairclough, 2006, p. 86). The theoretical lens of Dawson's framework of normative goods (2022) and Foucault's concepts of power dynamics (1991, 2020) aligns with Fairclough's CDA by examining how normative assumptions and power relations shape and are shaped by regulatory discourses. This approach deepens the understanding of how social media regulatory frameworks are formed, contested, and transformed within broader societal contexts.

The methodological framework presented above will be applied in the analysis of the data. In the following sections, the focus will shift towards examining the data collected through the lens of the outlined methodology. Specifically, the analysis will delve into the official transcript regarding the case of '*Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis*', identifying discursive formations and applying Fairclough's methodological lens.

## **5. Analysis**

This section presents the analysis of this thesis, divided into two main parts. First, a textual and discursive analysis is conducted utilizing the transcript included in Appendix A and the YouTube comments collected in Appendix B, addressing research question 1. Second, a theoretical analysis is employed, examining research questions 2 and 3 to understand how accountability is negotiated and how power dynamics can be found embedded in the discussion concerning social media platforms. The analysis includes three sub-conclusions to summarize all findings and answer the research questions.

### **5.1 Part one: Textual and Discursive analysis**

The first part of this analysis focuses on examining the textual and discursive features in the transcript from the congressional hearing and the YouTube comment section. Specifically, it seeks to identify the various discourses constructed throughout. The guiding question for this analysis is as follows:

**Research question 1:** *What textual and discursive features do the transcripts from the congressional hearing and YouTube comment section have, and which discourses can be seen constructed pertaining regulation of social media platforms?*

### **5.1.1. Talking on behalf of the parents and the population of America**

The hearing begins with two opening statements, during which the members describe the purpose of the hearing and underscore the necessity for public debate concerning the regulation of social media platforms, particularly to ensure the safety of children online. One member states:

*“Today, the Senate Judiciary Committee will continue its work on an issue on the mind of most, American families, how to keep our kids safe from sexual exploitation and harm in the internet age online child sexual exploitation includes the use of online platforms to target and groom children, (...) “(Appendix A, p. 1 ll. 9-11).*

In the quote, the member positions himself within the **‘The Senate Judiciary Committee’**, speaking on behalf of all committee members and stating that they will continue their work on behalf of American families to keep not only their but **‘our’** kids safe. Textual features can be identified in the quote revealing the purpose of holding the hearing. The modal verb **‘will continue’** suggests a future action, implying that the Committee will continue to work towards keeping children safe online. By tying the adjective **‘American’** together with **‘families,’** it is indicated that they are working on behalf of the American population specifically. Furthermore, the pronoun **‘our’** is used to underscore that the committee members are on the side of the families, aiming to protect the children as their own. In this quote, the member can be seen drawing on two main discourses. By emphasizing the well-being and protection of **‘American families,’** it is implied that the primary focus is on American citizens and, consequently, the members' nation, employing a nationalistic discourse. The second discourse is familial, framing the committee members as protectors ensuring children’s safety, a responsibility commonly associated with families.

Throughout the hearing, the members talk directly to the American population (Appendix A, p. 5, l. 115; p. 6, ll. 140-141; p. 54, l. 1330; p. 69, ll. 1670). Especially in questioning the CEO of TikTok, does it become apparent that the committee is not only focusing on protecting children and empowering parents but is speaking on behalf of America as a whole:

*“(...). According to the Wall Street Journal report from just yesterday, even now, ByteDance workers, without going through official channels, have access to the private information of American citizens quoting from the article. Private information of American citizens, including their birthdate, their IP address, and more”* (Appendix A, p. 69, ll. 1668-1671)

In this quote, the focus of protecting is on the **‘American citizens’**, and TikTok is therefore framed as a media that is not doing well in protecting data of citizens overall. The argument draws on a Wall Street Journal report and appeals to reasoning through logos. TikTok is, furthermore, referenced through their parent company, **ByteDance**, which is based in China (Appendix A, p. 34, l. 834). The committee member is there to question if Chinese workers can access information without going through **‘official channels,’** a metaphor for formal routes of procedures. Throughout the hearing, TikTok is set in relation to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) several times (Appendix A, p. 38, l. 961; p. 75, ll. 1818-1819; p. 85, l. 2033). Therefore, when the Committee members question the CEO of TikTok, national security comes into focus, even more so than the protection of children: *“Okay, so what we have here, we have a company that's a tool of the Chinese Communist Party that is poisoning the minds of America's children in some cases driving them to suicide (...)”* (Appendix A, p. 85, ll. 2033-2034). In the quote, metaphoric language is employed in describing the company of TikTok as a **‘tool of the Chinese Communist Party’** which is **‘poisoning the minds of America’s Children,’** thereby invoking a political ‘us and them’ discourse where China is using TikTok as a tool to target America children. The political discourse is primarily employed when questioning TikTok. When the focus shifts to the other four CEOs, the discussion centers on what could be done better from the companies’ sides in protecting children, thereby continuously drawing on an accountability discourse:

*“As you know, I feel strongly about privacy and believe that one of the best protections for an individual's privacy online involves end-to-end encryption, but we also know that a great deal of grooming and sharing of CSAM happens to occur on end-to-end encrypted systems. Tell me, does Meta allow juvenile accounts on its platforms to use encrypted messaging services within those apps?”* (Appendix A, p. 44, ll. 1102-1108).

In addressing the CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, the committee member uses the first-person pronoun **‘I’** to express personal concerns over online privacy. The adjective **‘strongly’** emphasizes the intensity of his feelings about the issue. Additionally, technical terms such as **‘end-to-end**

**encryption**’ are employed to position Zuckerberg as knowledgeable within the digital sphere, thereby heightening his credibility through ethos. The committee member then inquires about the company's policies regarding juvenile accounts and encrypted messaging, engaging in an accountability discourse to hold the company responsible for its practices. Throughout the hearing, the committee members emphasize the need for better regulation: *“We are here in this hearing because as a collective, your platforms really suck at policing themselves”* (Appendix A, p. 47, ll. 1175-1178). In the sentence **‘we are in this hearing,’** the subject pronoun **‘we’** refers to all attendees, emphasizing a collective agenda to address the issue of social media platforms failing at self-regulation. The word **‘suck’** stands in contrast to the formal language typically used in the hearing, showing the committee members strong disapproval of the platforms' regulatory practices. A metaphor is employed with the phrase **‘policing themselves,’** comparing the platforms to an ineffective police force. This comparison underscores the argument that the platforms lack adequate self-regulation, necessitating Congressional intervention to hold them accountable.

### 5.1.2 Social media companies are failing

When addressing issues with social media platforms and the companies behind them, committee members appeal to emotions such as seen in the following quote:

*“The representative from South Carolina, Mr. Duffy's son got caught up in a sex extortion ring in Nigeria using Instagram. He was shaken down, paid money that wasn't enough and he killed himself using Instagram. What would you like to say to him?”* (Appendix A, p. 25, ll. 630-633)

The story is about another committee member who has been personally impacted by the lack of regulation by social media companies, resulting in the exploitation of his son. This narrative, appeals to feelings of shock and outrage through pathos, positions this case as personal for the committee members. The member finishes the story by asking the CEO of Instagram, Mark Zuckerberg, **‘What would you like to say to him?’** thereby laying the responsibility on the companies. In addressing the CEOs, the members frequently employ pathos-laden language to stressing the seriousness of their statements: *“These are bastards by any known definition. Mr. Zuckerberg, you and the companies before us. I know you don't mean it to be so, but you have blood on your hands.”* (Appendix A, p. 6, ll. 131-133. Here, the subject pronoun **‘you’** directly addresses Zuckerberg, again blaming the companies. The metaphor **‘blood on your hands’** is used to highlight their responsibility for the

deaths of children, which also appeals to pathos by invoking moral accountability on the part of Instagram. The committee members blame the social media companies for not protecting children sufficiently. The language emphasizes the urgency and need for action to regulate these platforms. Furthermore, the committee members can be seen shaping a discourse of social media as dangerous and unsafe, as well framing the companies as failing to regulate these spaces, which is further accentuated when talking about legislative action taken by the committee members concerning this topic:

*“It is now time to repeal Section 230. This committee has made up the ideologically most different people you could find. We’ve come together through your leadership, Mr. Chairman, to pass five bills to deal with the problem of exploitation of children. I’ll talk about them in depth in a little bit. The bottom line is all these bills have met the same fate. They go nowhere. They leave the committee and they die”* (Appendix A, p. 6, ll. 143-147)

In the quote, a solution pertaining the law is made, specifically to revoke a section called 230.<sup>4</sup> The modal verb ‘**is**’ in the sentence ‘**it is now time**’ indicates that the committee member views this as a necessary step to take. To show the importance of this topic, the adverb ‘**ideologically**’ is used to demonstrate the unanimity of the committee members regarding this topic. By highlighting previous legislative steps taken by the committee to protect children, ethos is employed, emphasizing the Committee’s credibility as policymakers. The legislative steps taken are referred to as having ‘**left the committee and died,**’ a metaphor used to illustrate that the steps were not implemented by the companies, rendering the Committees efforts futile. The committee members thereby emphasize their role in advocating for implementations to protect children. This highlights the issue of corporate responsibility and further constructs the discourse surrounding social media companies as failing to fulfill their obligations.

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<sup>4</sup> Section 230 protects companies from being liable for content posted by their users, which prevents victims from suing them (Morrison, 2023).

### 5.1.3 Representing the companies

The CEOs can be seen as representing their companies, presenting their initiatives and values as positive, and drawing on moral discourses when addressing harmful or exploitative content involving children. In addressing the topic, Evan Spiegel, the CEO of Snapchat, states as follows:

*“I know that many of you have been working to protect children online since before Snapchat was created, and we are grateful for your long-term dedication to this cause and your willingness to work together to help keep our community safe. I want to acknowledge the survivors of online harms and the families who are here today who have suffered the loss of a loved one. Words cannot begin to express the profound sorrow I feel that a service we designed to bring people happiness and joy has been abused to cause harm.”* (Appendix A, p. 12, ll. 322-327)

In the quote, Spiegel employs the subject pronoun **‘you,’** implying that he is speaking directly to the committee members as a group, acknowledging their work of protecting children. By expressing gratitude for their efforts, he appeals to their feelings of recognition and appreciation, employing pathos. He further refers to Snapchat's social media platform as **‘our community,’** again appealing to feelings by addressing it as a collective space that Snapchat views as a family. Spiegel is showing he and his company respects the committee members and lawmakers. Addressing them this way is constructing a discourse concerning the companies wanting to cooperate and take the lawmakers seriously. The modal verb **‘want’** in **‘I want to acknowledge’** shows Spiegel's desire to personally express acknowledgment to the survivors of online harms, and the modal verb **‘can’** in **‘words cannot’** indicates that his sorrow is so immense that it cannot be expressed using language, again employing pathos to show empathy with the victims. He can be seen representing the company by describing the platform using overly positive words, **‘happiness’** and **‘joy’** in describing them and arguing that it is **‘abused to cause harm,’** implying others are to blame. In answering why, the Snapchat platform is an optimal space for predators, Spiegel responds:

*“Senator, that behavior is disgusting and reprehensible. We provide in-app reporting tools so that people who are being harassed or who have been shared inappropriate sexual content can report it. (...) “* (Appendix A, p. 20, ll. 523-526)

By using the adjectives **‘disgusting’** and **‘reprehensible,’** he expresses his condemnation and distances himself from the exploitation of children online. This choice of language engages with an

ethical discourse, making a clear moral judgment that such behavior is unacceptable. The subject pronoun **‘we’** in **‘we provided in-app reporting’** shows that Spiegel is speaking on behalf of the company, which has implemented a **‘reporting tool’** on their platform. The modal verb **‘can’** emphasize that the tool empowers users to report instances of harassment or other inappropriate content, thereby stressing that the agency of users is important to them. The CEO of X, Linda Yaccarino, also employs an ethical discourse: *"Well, we all strive to take down any type of violative content or disturbing content immediately at X. We have increased our capabilities with a two-step reporting process"* (Appendix A, p. 114, ll. 2710-2711). Here, the noun **‘content’** is associated with **‘violative’** and **‘disturbing,’** giving it a negative connotation. The adverb **‘immediately’** amplifies the verb **‘take down’**, showing that Yaccarino takes the urgency serious and commits to prompt action. The implementation of a **‘reporting process’** further indicates an aim to give users more agency online, thereby reinforcing a collective responsibility discourse. Overall, the CEOs can be seen as distancing themselves and their companies from this kind of content by engaging in a normative discourse of right and wrong.

As accounted for in the previous section, when questioning Chew, the committee members employ different discourses in relation to previously questioning the other CEOs. Therefore, Chew's responses reflect this perspective: *"What I'm saying is that we have spent billions of dollars to build this project. It is rigorous, it is robust, it's unprecedented, and I'm proud of the work that the 2000 employees are doing to protect the data of Americans"* (Appendix A, p. 69, ll. 1677-1679). In the quote, Chew's use of the subject pronoun **‘we’** indicates that he is representing his company. This is further supported by the modal verb **‘have’** in **‘have spent,’** suggesting that they have invested **‘billions of dollars’** in the past to **‘build this project.’** Specifically, the project mentioned is Project Texas, where TikTok is constructing a data center on American soil (TikTok, 2023). Chew's emphasis on the company's financial investment and pride in contributing to **‘protect the data of America’** aligns with national security discourses. These discourses emphasize the moral imperative for companies to safeguard user data, thereby mitigating concerns about their affiliations with China.

#### 5.1.4 Collective responsibility

The CEOs stress the need for cooperation and, thereby, collective responsibility when regulating social media platforms. The CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, states: *"We also have our own legislative proposal for what we think would be most effective in terms of helping the internet and the various companies give parents control over the experience"* (Appendix A, p. 33, ll. 820-821). In this

quote, the modal verb **‘would’** is used to propose a potential solution for better regulating social media platforms through a **‘legislative proposal’** aimed at giving **‘parents control.’** By acknowledging the need for both congressional legislation and parental control, Zuckerberg highlights the shared responsibility in this matter. His assertion that such a law would benefit the internet indicates that it should apply to all social media platforms, not just Facebook. The CEO of Discord, Jason Citron, talks into the same discourse:

*“(...) We very much believe that this content is disgusting and that there are many things about the Stop CSAM bill that I think are very encouraging (...) and we’d be very open to having conversations with you and your team to talk through the details of the bills and more.”* (Appendix A, p. 19, ll. 489-493)

In the quote, Citron uses the subject pronoun **‘we,’** thereby taking a collective stance, explaining that his company find the content **‘disgusting.’** He engages in a normative discourse where the exploitation of children is deemed immoral, thereby framing Discord as a company within the moral standards of society. By using the subject pronoun **‘I,’** Citron includes his personal viewpoint, specifically that the bill proposed by Congress is immensely **‘encouraging,’** a positive wording indicating his support for this kind of legislative action. In the following sentence, he again speaks on behalf of his company, seen in the subject pronoun **‘we’** and the modal verb **‘would.’** This indicates the company's willingness to engage in discussions with **‘you and your team,’** a personalized form of addressing the committee members, laying the groundwork for cooperation. By drawing on discourses concerning law, he places a responsibility on the congress as opposed to only on individuals.

The CEO of TikTok, Shou Chew, also reinforces the discourse of collective responsibility. In his opening statement, one of his concluding remarks is: *“Keeping teens safe online requires a collaborative effort as well as collective action”* (Appendix A, p. 16, ll. 422). The word **‘collective’** is set in relation to both **‘effort’** and **‘action,’** showing their willingness to work together with others in regulation their platforms. Chew mentions both parental and legislative measures throughout the opening statement thereby drawing on both in constructing a discourse on collective responsibility (Appendix A, p. 15, ll. 400-401; p. 387).

### 5.1.5 Placing the transcript in a discursive dimension

The second dimension in Fairclough's three-dimensional model is the discursive, wherein the tool of text production analysis is employed. The focus is on identifying the sender and intended audience of the text to gain better insight into how the text can be interpreted (Fairclough, 2006, p. 79).

The transcription is a written document containing the spoken words exchanged during the congressional hearing held between politicians and companies addressing the topic '*Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis*' (Hendrix et al., 2024). A transcript was not officially released on the Congress official website; instead, a video from the hearing was shared on the official site of the US Committee Juridical Site (U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2024), and other mainstream media outlets were permitted to live stream it on their YouTube channels (CBS News, 2024; CNBC Television, 2024; Associated Press, 2024). This indicates an intention to share the hearing publicly, aligning with the US practice of transparency and open government. This practice is utilized to strengthen democracy and foster public trust among American citizens (The White House, 2015). The intended audience then becomes American citizens interested in politics or the topic in general. Sharing the videos on YouTube through mainstream media is then used as a tool to share it with as many Americans as possible. The sender of the hearing can then be seen as two, one being the U.S. Senate Committee on the juridical representing a part of Congress and the other being the committee members speaking within the hearing. As a sender, Congress might aim to create awareness and transparency as described on its website. Still, the committee members are also representing themselves as politicians who have been voted in by their respective states (Senate.gov, n.d). The role of politicians can be found embedded in some of the statements from committee members within the hearing: "*When we had cigarettes killing people, we did something about it. Maybe not enough. You're going to talk about guns. We have the ATF, nothing here. There's not a damn thing anybody can do about it*" (Appendix A, p. 6 134-136) The quote is from a member talking about the need for more legislation concerning the protection of children online. In the quote, the member draws on a discourse concerning public health and safety to emphasize the urgency of the hearing. In talking about health and safety as longstanding political priorities, the committee member positions himself as working towards protecting Americans. This aligns with the primary purpose of the hearing, which is to publicly demonstrate the politicians' commitment to providing legal

protection for voters, citizens, and victims alike, as further elaborated in the quote: “*Every American abused by all the companies in front of me, of all the people in America, we could give blanket liability protection too. This would be the last group I would pick.*” (Appendix A, p. 6, ll. 140-141) In this quote, the committee member emphasizes that they work for the interests of Americans, rather than those of the social media companies. The member advocate for the public's welfare, directing the message toward the intended audience, which, depending on the role of Congress or politicians, can have different roles but are part of the American population.

### 5.1.6 YouTube comments

The comments collected from YouTube users, presented in Appendix B, offer insights into the public's reaction to the “*Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis*”. Unlike other forms of produced text, such as articles or scripted speeches, these comments represent direct and unfiltered reactions from viewers. The comments range from a single word to entire paragraphs (Appendix B, p. 8) some include emojis to convey feelings or facial expressions that are difficult to express without face-to-face interaction (Singh, 2022). For example, one user comments: “*This been going on since history, phones are help to parent that have to work, 😏*” (Appendix B, p. 8). In this comment, the user adds a winking smiley to convey humor or irony. However, not all emojis convey a straightforward interpretation. For instance: “*so are u gonna try to outlaw fast food too 🤪?*” (Appendix B, p. 11). Here, the skull emoji can have different meanings depending on the reader. According to Singh (2022), the skull can signify that the user is “*dead from laughing*” or expressing frustration. The comments also exhibit a form of language where grammatical accuracy is not prioritized, making communication fast and informal. The first comment, “**This been going on,**” is missing the subject-verb “**has,**” and the following comment uses the short form of the subject pronoun “you” as “**u.**” The comment sections can then be seen as spaces where communication is informal and distinct from in-person or more formal communication. This can be considered a general attribute of YouTube comments, as this style of communicating can be found in all three comment sections, or at least in the comments on this topic.

The comment section is furthermore built around interaction, reflecting the possibility to react by either linking a comment or answer other comments. The users have the option to “tag” each other, meaning they can mention which comment they are answering by notifying the user through their name. In Appendix B, the usernames have been anonymized, therefore, to show this kind of interaction a pretense with the description (reacting to previous comment) has been added. (Appendix

B, p. 3; 4; 10; 13; 23). Not all comments get reactions, but those that do highlight the collective construction of meaning and discourses, making it an ideal place to study the social construction of meaning, wherein discourses can be found. One user posted a comment: *“I used social media for communications for my loved ones and friends and it's very useful. Blame the parents for their lack of regulations for using social media by their children.”* (Appendix B, p. 13)” The quote contains the pronoun subject **‘I’** indicating that the speaker is conveying a personal meaning. The past tense verb **‘used’** indicates that the writer does not use social media anymore, though given the format of the comments this could be a spelling error. Furthermore, the word **‘social media’** is linked to positive-laden words **‘loved ones’**, **‘friends’**, and **‘useful’**, indicating that the user has a positive perspective on the platforms, therein engaging in a technological discourse in which attributes such as communication are highlighted. The word **‘parents’** is linked to negative-laden words such as **‘blame’** and **‘lack of regulation’**. The user then engages in a discourse of parental or family-oriented responsibility. The comment is, as mentioned, a reaction to a congressional hearing and can thus be seen as a reaction to the discourses of collective responsibility. In response to this comment, three reactions were added:

First comment: *“If you are not sexually exploiting children, why would you care about restrictions protecting children?”* (Appendix B, p. 13)

Second comment *“(in response to the previous comment): What the hell are you yappin about?”* (Appendix B, p. 13)

Third comment: *“They're not pushing for child safety though; they are pushing for a ban on apps due to supposed lack of child safety. Banning apps that everyone uses to communicate and express themselves freely, just because parents don't properly protect or educate their kids makes it a big issue for people who just want to use the app as is, and not for sexual exploitation.”* (Appendix B, p. 13)

The first comment is posed as a rhetorical question, stating an opinion of protecting children online. In the question, a direct form of language is utilized, where the user uses provocation and thus appeals to the feelings of the reader through pathos. The second comment employs an exclamatory tone, as seen through the phrase **‘what the hell,’** as well as the word **‘yapping,’** an informal way of referring to speaking. Both textual features indicate frustration with the first comment. The third comment offers a form of clarification on the topic. In the comment, the pronoun **‘they’** refers to a third-person

subject, given the context, it likely refers to the politicians. In using a metaphorical form of **'pushing for,'** the user clarifies that the politicians are not pushing for child safety but instead a **'ban on the apps.'** In the next sentences, the user connects the word **'apps'** with **'communication'** and **'express themselves freely.'** The user thereby engages in a liberalistic discourse, where social media is seen as a way to express oneself freely. By suggesting that Congress is employing censorship under the pretense of protecting children, the user implies that this action goes against liberal values. In the last sentence, the user connects the word **'parent'** with **'protect'** and **'educate,'** engaging in the discourse of parental responsibility in regulating social media to keep children safe online. The interaction between the users reflects how discourses are constructed and negotiated continually between individuals. In the hearing, the discourse of responsibility was discussed as a collective theme, which was then reflected and renegotiated throughout the comments.

The parental or family-oriented discourse of responsibility can be found continually throughout the comment section (Appendix B, p. 14; 45; 50; 70). Even though this discourse can be found in majority of comments, responsibility is continually negotiated: *"So social media CEOs have to make sure their platform is 100% perfect with no negative flaws. But these politicians can ignore what the public want and not address issues and still carry on what they're doing"* (Appendix B, p. 20). In the comment, the modal verb **'have to'** in the sentence **'CEOs have to make sure their platform'** implies that the user sees an underlying obligation, whereas the modal verb **'can'** in the sentence **'politicians can ignore'** implies an ability not to do something. The user is therefore communicating that there is a power difference between the CEOs and politicians within the hearing. The user then implies that politicians should take responsibility for protecting children online, thus speaking into a discourse of shared responsibility. Another user comments: *"(...) What a shame. We should educate our kids on how to navigate social media so they can use this platforms properly and safely"* (Appendix B, p 15). In the comment, the subject pronoun **'we'** indicates that the user is speaking on behalf of a group, who, according to the comment, should educate kids on how to navigate social media. The word **'educate'** is linked to the words **'properly'** and **'safely'**, the user thereby talks into an individual form of responsibility where safety should be taught through education.

### 5.1.7 Comments in the Discursive Dimension

When analyzing the production of the text and identifying a sender, no single sender can be pinpointed; instead, the sender is the multitude of individual users who express their opinions and interact internally through their reactions. Despite the decentralized nature of the senders, some general

observations about the users can be made. In the analysis of the hearing, it became apparent that the intended audience was Americans. However, the YouTube comment section reflects a more globalized audience, as evidenced by comments such as: “*How Americans solve problems = find someone else to blame*” (2 likes) (Appendix B, p. 46), “*why in my country Singapore, Malaysia nothing happening like this .... because over here parents are well monitoring their children....*” (Appendix A, p. 13). This shows that the discussion surrounding social media platforms is not solely American but because of them being available worldwide creates and globalized discourse of protecting children online. Take the comment about Singapore, the user is reflecting on why this is not a political discussion in their country, the hearing can then be said to be creating awareness which may impact other countries and their political outreach or given the hegemonic discourse of parental responsibility make parents across the world take more accountability. The first comment setting Americans in relation to not solving problems but instead laying the blame elsewhere, reflects that the opposite effect is taken and other individuals from other countries do not want to follow American politics. The users in the comment section also seem to be quite diverse. Some do not have kids: “*If I had kids now I'd raise them Amish. That being said Zuker is an arrogant AH*” (Appendix B, p. 135). Some claim to be parents: “*I'd rather schools teach my child online safety and hound upon anti-bullying than teaching LGBTQ*” (Appendix B, p. 139). Others could be underage themselves: “*I'm not American but I am very interested in this because I have friends who are literally 12 USING TIKTOK*” (Appendix B, p. 35). Reflecting many different voices in the debate, the comment section serves as a diverse space where public opinion can be debated among various groups in society, thereby creating and negotiating discourses across different perspectives. The comments section thus serves as a space for public discourse, where diverse and global users negotiate, and construct meanings related to the hearing and broader issues of responsibility and blame.

Some comments do not seem to have an intended audience and are simply posted for their own sake: “*lalalalala*” (Appendix B, p. 140). Others ask direct questions: “*Anyone know who the nameless guy at 2:08 is?*” (Appendix B, p. 131). Some comments simply state observations about the people in the hearing: “*It's crazy how Mark actually thinks we believe he's doing this to bring families and friends together*” (Appendix B, p. 119). The intended audience, therefore, seems to become each other, a public sphere where everyone with an opinion can express it. In comments such as the last one, the user is talking about the CEO of Facebook but not directly to him, indicating that the intended audience is not the individuals in the video. Instead, the comment section is a place where users can

meet and discuss the content, even specifying particular moments in the video to form and share opinions based on their observations.

### 5.1.8 Sub-conclusion

Analyzing textual and discursive features of the congressional hearing *'Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis'* and the YouTube comments, makes it apparent that committee members, the five CEOs, and users in the comment section all draw on different narratives and employ different rhetorical devices in constructing discourses concerning the regulation of social media platforms.

In the transcript, the committee members situate themselves as protectors of children and the American population, and by appealing to feelings and creditability, they underscore their role as policymakers who take the topic of protecting children online seriously. In addressing committee members, it becomes apparent that a discourse of the companies failing to regulate is constructed, underscoring the need for more corporate responsibility to be taken. The five CEOs talk on behalf of their companies, drawing on positive-laden language when describing their efforts to regulate their platforms. Though employing a normative discourse of exploitation and harmful content being immoral, underscoring the company's position in wanting to protect children online. The CEOs include the users as necessary for regulating the platforms, thereby constructing a discourse concerning online regulations as a collective and showing an aim to give users more agency online. The discursive features of the text reflect an underlying political agenda aimed at sharing the hearing with as many Americans as possible, fostering transparency, and engendering trust in addressing the topic of social media regulation seriously. This could suggest an underlying agenda by the committee members to frame questions in a more nationalistic manner, positioning themselves as working on behalf of the American population instead of solely focusing on protecting children.

The YouTube comments reflect a communication style that can be defined as informal, characterized by short, reactive sentences. Emojis are used to express emotions, and spelling is often disregarded, creating a distinct space from other forms of text. Furthermore, the comment section serves as an interactive setting where perspectives and reactions are shared and negotiated. Upon examining the discourses constructed among users, it becomes evident that a focus on parental and individual responsibility emerges as the most prominent discourse. However, responsibility is constantly negotiated based on the discussions between committee members and CEOs during the hearing.

Analysis of the discursive features of the YouTube sections reveals a collective space where multiple senders of different nationalities and age groups can be identified. This reflects a more diverse audience than the hearing aims to target, which is primarily American.

## **5.2 Part Two: Theoretical analysis**

The second part of this analysis is structured around research questions 2 and 3. The first focusing on addressing research question 2 concerning the negotiation of accountability, utilizing Mark Dawson's framework of normative accountability (Dawson, 2022). Secondly, research question 3 will be answered, which pertains to the underlying power dynamics identified within the hearing, employing Michel Foucault's concepts of power (1991; 2020).

### **5.2.1 Negotiating accountability**

The following analysis applies Dawson's (2022) framework of four normative *goods*, *openness*, *non-arbitrariness*, *effectiveness*, and *publicness*, to contextualize the congressional hearing within societal practices and better understand how accountability is negotiated among actors. The analysis is structured around and aims to answer the following research question:

**Research question 2:** *How do the discourses constructed by committee members, the five CEOs, and YouTube users regarding the regulation of online safety for children, reflect the negotiation of accountability between these entities?*

#### **5.2.1.1 Openness**

The first norm, openness, refers to the level of transparency the actors, who are asked to take accountability, convey. During the hearing, a committee member asks the CEOs to disclose, in yes or no answers, whether the companies report on the total amount of content that violates their policies on suicide and self-harm, thus talking into the discourse of corporate responsibility and accountability in regulating social media (Appendix A, p. 41, ll. 1017-1026). In accordance with Dawson's framework of normative goods, the CEOs will appear to be taking more accountability the more they disclose about their reasoning. Conversely, if they try to avoid or talk around the topic, they will be perceived as less accountable (Dawson, 2022, p. 83). Because the committee member only wants yes

and no answers to this question, the CEOs' possibilities for openness is limited. The CEOs attempt to clarify their responses to avoid giving incorrect answers, Zuckerberg says: *"No. I believe we focus on prevalence"* (Appendix A, p. 41, l. 1038) elaborating that the specific number is not disclosed, only a percentage. Yaccarino: *"Senator, as a reminder, we have less than 1% of our users that are between the ages of 13 and 17 (...) Yes. We've taken over almost a million posts down that in regards to mental health and self harm."* (Appendix A, p. 42, ll. 1041-1046). Chew: *"Senator, we disclose the number we take down based on each category of violation and how many of that were taken down proactively before it was reported"* (Appendix B, p. 42, l. 1051). When the committee members refrain from seeking further elaboration on the question, the CEOs cannot fully defend themselves transparently to the public. However, by taking the questions seriously and attempting to address them in accordance with their specific circumstances, they demonstrate a willingness to engage, potentially enhancing public perception. Furthermore, all five CEOs acknowledge that they disclose how much content is found violating their policies thereby showing willingness to be open, although Zuckerberg's response of only disclosing a percentage could diminish his perceived openness. This interaction can also be interpreted as the committee members wielding power in shaping the public perception of the CEOs. The committee members demand answers while also regulating the form and length of responses. This dynamic, influenced by the norm of openness, can significantly influence how the public views the CEOs. This unequal interaction is also picked up on by a user on YouTube: *"You know what isn't going to help come to a solution? Giving Senators just 7 minutes to ask questions and then watch them ask aggressive questions and don't allow the CEOs to give answers"* (Appendix B, p. 18). The users show that openness is important for the CEOs to provide solutions, implying that it would be a form of accountability. There is an acknowledgment of the complexity of regulating social media platforms; therefore, the CEOs are not expected to take blame but to be willing to work on the problem, confirming Dawson's formulation of openness as an accountability measure.

When asked about the regulatory framework employed in Discord, Citron responds: *"Discord is not allowed to be used by children under the age of 13, and we do not use end-to-end encryption for text messages. We believe that it's very important to be able to respond to well from law enforcement requests, and we're also working on proactively building technology (...)"* (Appendix A, p. 45 ll. 1124-1126) In the quote, Citron elaborates on their regulation measures, openly sharing that they have requirements and do not use encryption in text measures. He further shares that they are proactively working with law enforcement as well as constantly trying to improve, implying that the company

has nothing to hide. They are open to both the committee members and law enforcement in general, showing a willingness to be transparent. To Citron, the committee member answers: *“End to end encryption as much as it can prove useful elsewhere, it can be harmful, especially if you are on a site where you know children are being groomed and exploited. If you allow children onto an end-to-end encryption-enabled app, that can prove problematic.”* (Appendix A, p. 45, ll. 1132-1134). The committee member validates Citron's statement, confirming that Discords regulation efforts is effective in protecting children. By being transparent and explaining the reasons behind their regulatory choices, the CEO therefore demonstrates accountability. Moreover, the dialogue illustrates how discourses among actors shape the norms surrounding appropriate regulation. In this case, encryption is acknowledged as potentially harmful in the context of protecting children, revealing that privacy is not a primary concern when it comes to moderating harmful content or shielding children online. Moreover, the public gain the opportunity to access whether sufficient accountability is taken by actors.

#### **5.2.1.2 Non-arbitrariness**

According to the norm of non-arbitrariness, actors should use power only with justifiable reasons and within defined limits (Dawson, 2022, p. 85). In the context of regulating safety measures for children online, both CEOs and committee members should make decisions grounded in expert knowledge and with respect for human rights. In the hearing, a committee member states: *“So we've heard from several of the leaders on this committee, the chair and ranking and very talented and experienced senators, the frame that we are looking at this is consumer protection. When there is some new technology we put in place regulations to make sure that it is not overly harmful”* (Appendix A, p. 40, ll. 987-990) The member highlights a commitment to consumer protection through regulation on an informed basis. The member reassures the audience that they will implement regulations, in a thoughtful way. He continues that they will use a frame of consumer protection to ensure decisions are made with good reason, following the norm of not acting arbitrarily. Furthermore, by highlighting the legitimacy of the committee, their background for making this decision is used to strengthening their own accountability. About the CEOs the member further states:

*“Without better information, how can policymakers know whether the protections you've testified about, the new initiatives, the starting programs, the monitoring, and the takedowns are working? How can we understand meaningfully how big these problems are without measuring and reporting data? Mr. Zuckerberg, your testimony referenced a National Academy of Sciences study that said at*

*the population level there is no proof of harm to mental health.* “ (Appendix A, pp. 40-41, ll. 1011-1016)

In the quote the committee member is questioning the information provided by Zuckerberg, arguing that protection measures need to be taken on an informed basis. By referencing Zuckerberg's information as unreliable, the member implies that the company is not regulating their platforms with the children's best interest in mind, because, as he further states “*Well, it may not be at the population level, but I'm looking at a room full of hundreds of parents who have lost children (...)*” (Appendix A, p. 41, ll. 1017-1019) The main topic of interest is the safety of children, and information about them relates to the norm of non-arbitrariness. Throughout the hearing, committee members primarily draw on expert knowledge from diverse sources, such as data reports, university studies, and mainstream media (Appendix A, p. 17, ll. 516-517; p. 30, ll. 749-751; p. 32, ll. 793-795). In contrast, the CEOs mainly draw on expert knowledge from within their own companies (Appendix A, p. 33, ll. 820-822; p. 41, ll. 1028-1030). This makes sense, as the CEOs are participating as experts on their respective companies. However, when considering the regulation of children's online safety and the normative good of non-arbitrariness, it can be argued that the CEOs are wielding power in the regulatory process, on a basis that might be biased toward their interest. The dynamic between the committee members and the CEO reflects the broader discourses on the regulation and power of entities. The committee members' use of external expert knowledge contributes to a discourse that values multiple perspectives in regulatory decisions. On the contrary, the CEOs reliance on corporate knowledge could shape regulative norms to favor corporate interest. The two parallel discourses illustrate how norms surrounding the regulation of social media are constructed between different actors, stressing the importance of non-arbitrariness in creating regulations for children's online safety.

### ***5.2.1.3 Effectiveness***

Another norm presented by Dawson is that of effectiveness, referring to how effective actors are in achieving public goals. In the digital sphere, this can be seen, in the way actors reflect on their own regulatory abilities (Dawson, 2022, p. 86). Throughout the hearing, the CEOs reflect on their abilities in regard to regulation:

*“That's probably one of the factors that we use in reporting and in general, we've reported more people and done more reports like this to NCMEC the National Center of Missing Exploited Children than any other company in the industry. We proactively go out of our way across our services to do*

*this and have made, I think it's more than 26 million reports, which is more than the whole rest of the industry combined. So, I think the allegation that....”* (Appendix A, p. 52, ll. 1296-1300)

Zuckerberg argues that Metas reporting strategies, implemented on their platforms, are among the most effective in the industry, thereby drawing on a competition discourse to reflect on the company's ability to regulate its content. By framing the protection of children in relation to other companies, he communicates that effectiveness in regulation should be measured comparatively. In emphasizing that **'26 million reports'** have been made, Zuckerberg illustrates that effective regulation on social media is almost an impossible task. He argues that his company is meeting industry standards, leading in the area regulation. The committee member does not seem to accept Zuckerberg's argument for effectively regulating platforms: *“Mr. Zuckerberg, Mr. Zuckerberg your company and every social media company needs to do much more to protect children. (...)”* (Appendix A, p. 52, ll. 1302-1303). He view the discourse of competition as irrelevant in this discussion; instead, he states that all social medias should do more. This indicates that Zuckerberg fails in claiming to effectively protect children online. Skepticism surrounding social media as effective regulators can also be found in the comments, where one user states: *“Is not entirely but largely their fault. They have the AI to build algorithms to filter out content but intentionally let the algorithms do something else (...).”* (Appendix B, 119). The user argues that social media companies could enhance their regulatory efforts by refining their algorithms, thus engaging with the broader discourse within social media regulation that companies choose not to do enough. This resonates with the argument made by the committee member in that companies can implement further measures if they choose to do so. This discourse can be found in other comments: *“The CEOs only care about easy to implement fixes that don't affect the millions they are paid, if it means a pay cut or hard work they will allow CSAM to continue”* (Appendix B, p. 57). This user argues that social media companies are not regulating effectively enough, but instead bases their argument on the fact that the CEOs are representing companies who are profit-driven. Thereby arguing that profit is being prioritized over the protection of children. While not all comments agree with or engage in this discourse, none argue that the companies are effective in regulation. Instead, the prevailing argument is that it is not entirely the company's responsibility: *“The solution to all this is pretty simple. PARENTS. Kids are having access to this apps because PARENTS are allowing it. They are the ones to blame above these platforms”* (Appendix B, p. 53). Since the CEOs are not reflecting on their regulatory implementations or effectively conveying the necessary steps to protect children, they cannot be said to be taking accountability for this issue. This lack of

accountability impacts the discourse, reinforcing the idea that the solution should be a collective effort among various entities.

#### **5.2.1.4 Publicness**

The last norm presented by Dawson, publicness, refers to whether the actors can demonstrate that they are working in the interest of the public good and not for personal benefit. When assessing the effectiveness of the CEOs arguments it became apparent that they are viewed as speaking on behalf of their companies' best interest instead of the users. In the YouTube comments, this can be seen through the discourse on the companies being framed as profit-driven, and in the CEO's argumentation this can be seen as they talk into a competition discourse, comparing themselves to industry standards instead of a discourse of protecting children. This is backed up by both the statements and questioning form of the committee members, who thereby can be said to be a part of constructing the narrative that the CEOs and their companies are unreliable and do not take accountability. Especially during the questioning of TikTok, it becomes apparent that the members view the companies as primarily working for their own benefit, as evidenced by a committee member questioning Chew:

*“(...)I'm going to tell you, and I told this when you and I met last week in my office. I do not believe you and I'll tell you, the American people don't either. If you look at what is on TikTok in China, you are promoting to kids, science and math videos, and educational videos, and you limit the amount of time kids can be on TikTok. In the United States, you are promoting to kids self-harm videos and anti-Israel propaganda. Why is there such a dramatic difference, “ (Appendix A, p. 54, ll. 1329-1333)*

The member explicitly states a lack of trust in TikTok and Chew claims, drawing on a discourse of distrust regarding social media companies' transparency and honesty. In saying that the 'American people' do not trust the company either, he is engaging in a political discourse of 'us' versus 'them,' where the company is deemed untrustworthy because it is perceived as actively causing harm to the population. The claim that TikTok promotes different videos in China than in the US suggests that the company is not fulfilling its social responsibility to prioritize the welfare of American children and youth. This also engages with the broader discourse on the responsibility of social media companies in promoting health and education, and highlighting the underlying norm that health and education are in the public's best interest. Chew disagrees with this characterization and counters *“That is not true. We have a lot of science of math content here on TikTok. There's so much of it to*

*the STEM feed for 100 billion views* “(Appendix A, p. 54, ll. 1344-1345) Actively arguing that the member's statement is inaccurate, trying to demonstrate that TikTok is, in fact, taking their social responsibility seriously. Therefore, when analyzing whether the CEOs are being held accountable in relation to the norm of 'publicness,' it becomes apparent that the committee member is already engaging in a discourse suggesting that TikTok is not taking responsibility, thereby undermining the CEOs' own statements.

This characterization of TikTok is not accepted by all users in the comments: “*Does that make sense? It isn't the CEO's fault that TikTok or Toyota failed to protect the children. It is the parents and child's responsibility when using the app or vehicle. They're just trying to get rid of TikTok.*” (Appendix B, p. 10) The user draws on the discourse of parental responsibility, arguing that companies should not be held to the same standards. Additionally, the user claims that the member is attempting to lower TikTok's accountability to advance their own agenda of removing the app from the American market. However, this perspective seems to vary among users: “*Our example of Toyota and Ford are not the same situation. TikTok is manipulating kids biochemically, making them addicted, and so on. Are you that slow? Why do you think it's hard for people to stop eating junk food even when they know it's not healthy?*” (Appendix B, p. 10). This user instead aligns with the committee member's discourse, viewing social media companies as not taking their social responsibility seriously. By comparing the platforms to junk food, the user argues that the media is unhealthy due to its addictive nature. Among the users, discourses regarding social media companies and their responsibilities are constantly being negotiated. Some align with the perspectives of the committee members, while others counter the CEOs' claims as being politically motivated and aimed at protecting children online.

#### **5.2.1.5 Sub-conclusion**

In answering research question 2, pertaining how accountability is negotiated between actors, the four norms of *openness, non-arbitrariness, effectiveness, and publicness* were identified in the analysis of the negotiation within the hearing, as well as in the additional reactions of the public through the YouTube comments sections. When examining openness among actors, it became apparent that, due to the roles of the committee members and CEOs, the level of openness the CEOs could demonstrate highly depended on the questions they were asked. Even though not much time for explanation were given, by the CEOs remaining open and willing to engage in conversation agreement of best practice

in regulating the platforms to protect children are made. The negotiation further highlights that user privacy is not a concern regarding this specific topic. This shows that different viewpoints are considered when discussing safety, especially concerning children. The committee relies on non-arbitrariness, drawing on expert knowledge and information from outside sources to justify their questions to the CEOs and their arguments for better regulation. The CEOs primarily draw on data and knowledge from their own companies and compare themselves to industry standards when advocating for regulations of their platforms. The committee members thus appear more arbitrary, whereas the CEOs can be seen as representatives of companies operating in a competitive sphere where protecting children is also a priority. This is further underscored when looking at the norm of effectiveness, where the CEOs fail in convincing the committee members that they are effectively regulating the platforms, but instead could do much more. The last norm of publicness becomes especially relevant when looking at the accountability of the CEO of TikTok, who because there are not American owned does is not viewed as having the public good in mind. Here the discourse shaped of TikTok being dangerous for the American population can be seen reflected in the comments, where users claim to delete the app. Overall, the discourses reflect a multifaceted negotiation of accountability shaped by differing perspectives and priorities regarding regulation of social media platforms among committee members, CEOs and YouTube users.

### **5.2.2 Underlying power dynamics**

The following analysis applies Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power (1991) and biopower (2020) to examine the power dynamics evident in the context of the congressional hearing. By employing this theoretical framework, the analysis seeks to understand the mechanisms through which power is exercised and how it shapes societal practices. This analysis aims to address the following research question:

**Research question 3:** *How do the underlying power dynamics between Committee members, the five CEOs, and YouTube users shape the governance of social media platforms in 2024, and how are these dynamics reflected in the discourse on regulation?*

#### **5.2.2.1 Content Moderation and the Exercise of Disciplinary Power**

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is exercised through various techniques and mechanisms throughout society. This power disciplines individuals through regimes of knowledge and truth

embedded within discourses, compelling them to act in certain ways (Foucault, 1991, p. 194). When analyzing the congressional case, disciplinary power can be identified on several levels: within the congressional hearing between the committee members and CEOs, among users in the comments section, and in a dualistic manner, with these spheres continually impacting each other.

During the hearing, the committee members and CEOs discuss how to best regulate platforms to make them safer for children. One aspect they discuss is content moderation, to which the CEO of Discord, Jason Citron, states:

*“Chair, Our goal is to get all of that content off of our platform and ideally prevent it from showing up in the first place or from people engaging in these kinds of horrific activities. We deploy a wide array of techniques that work across every surface on Discord. I mentioned we recently launched something called Teen Safety Assist, which works everywhere and it's on by default for teen users who kind of act like a buddy that lets them know if they're in a situation or talking with someone that may be inappropriate so they can report that to us and block that use”* (Appendix A, p. 21, ll. 545-550)

According to the CEO, the goal is to remove content that exploits children so users cannot engage with it on the platforms, engaging in a normative discourse in which child exploitation is deemed immoral, making content removal the only rightful action in regulating their platforms. This normative discourse can be seen as disciplinary power, providing a moral compass in discussing this topic.

Citron states that a new form of regulation called 'Teen Safety Assist,' has been implemented on the platform. Where users can add on another user to help monitor situations where they might feel uncomfortable. In this implementation, surveillance, which Foucault presents through the metaphor of panopticism, is employed as a supportive feature to collectively monitor other users who may act inappropriately. Social media platforms like Discord are built with both private and public features for interaction (Discord, 2022). In the public sphere, users interact knowing they are being watched by others, but in private sphere such as chats, there is no public regulation, which is what the CEO of Discord is advocating to implement. Thus, within the discourse of collective regulation advocated by the CEOs, the implementation of internal public discipline is being proposed as a viable solution for regulating social media platforms.

The CEO of Snapchat points out that the Snapchat is built as a private messaging app, which prevents users from sharing exploitative content in public spheres. He presents this aspect as a positive feature that limits the pressure to perform publicly: “*We don't have public likes or comments when you share your story with friends*” (Appendix A, p. 13, l. 337). However, while the CEO showcases the benefits of privacy in reducing public judgment, committee members argue that the private nature of Snapchat is what makes it dangerous. They highlight concerns about the platform being a tool for sexual predators: “*(...) The man admitted that he only used Snapchat with LW and not any other platform because he “knew that chats would go away. “Did you or anyone else at Snap really fail to see that the platform was the perfect tool for sexual predators?”*” (Appendix A, p. 20, ll. 520-521) The platform is then shaped as dangerous, because the privacy features end up protecting predators, prompting the committee members to confront Spiegel into not taking accountability.

Within the negotiation of collective responsibility, public surveillance is framed as a positive way of regulating platforms. Therefore, private data on all users should be collected so harmful content can be more easily connected to the users (Appendix A, p. 83). Additionally, children should be registered and monitored by social media companies to prevent them from being harmed or potentially lying about their age online: “*Social media platforms should also be able to access this information when someone creates an account to prevent children from lying about their age*” (Appendix B, p. 90). The users' view on the regulation of social media when it comes to protecting children aligns with Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, where surveillance and data collection become mechanisms of control. By collecting private data, social media companies can use surveillance to discipline and regulate user behavior. This approach aims to protect children and enforce social norms by identifying and punishing those who engage in harming children online. The implementation reflects how disciplinary power is exercised in the digital age and how this mechanism is accepted as a good way of regulation in the comment section. This highlights how privacy is considered less important when it comes to protecting children, and that disciplinary power in these spheres is welcome.

#### **5.2.2.2 Dynamics of mutual surveillance**

These monitoring implementations also create power dynamics in how committee members, CEOs, and YouTube users communicate, thereby shaping the governance of social media platforms in the contemporary context of 2024.

Because the hearing is being filmed and uploaded to YouTube, where users can comment on the content, the participants in the hearing are also aware that they have an additional audience: the public.

Throughout the comment section especially the committee members are being mocked and therefore not taken seriously: “2:22:13 *Senator Cotton, you conducted an excellent grilling, successfully revealing to people around the world how the arrogance of America politician. (100 likes)*” (Appendix B: 69) The users are using timestamps to indicate specific moments they found funny within the hearing. This shows the hearing as a form of panopticism, where users are publicly viewing the hearing and internally sharing opinions. The comment, which has a hundred likes, indicates that the user is being acknowledged and that many users back each other up publicly. In this example, the way the committee member is asking questions is mocked as being too direct, constructing the member as arrogant. The users are thereby shaping the overall discourse of the hearing, portraying the politicians as incompetent. Comments where the members are seen as incompetent can be found often throughout the hearing, underscoring this view: *'Always nice to see how deranged and out of touch all the lawmakers are when it comes to technology. And you want them to regulate anything, lol.'* (Appendix B, p. 74-57) Here, the members are deemed as not being technical enough to regulate the platforms effectively. The user is engaging in the same discourse, as reflected in another comment: *'As usual, no progress, just old people scolding'* (Appendix B, p. 73), commenting on the members' age and thereby implying they are not competent enough to regulate the platforms. This reflects Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, where the users exercise a form of social control. This socially constructed narrative of the committee members as old and incompetent serves to regulate and discipline the discourse around the hearing, highlighting the power of the users, namely their ability to shape and influence perceptions.

These power dynamics operate dualistically, as illustrated by Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, where individuals in society become mutual supervisors (Foucault, 1991, p. 200). If lawmakers are perceived as lacking competence, users may disregard their authority in constructing knowledge and truth, leading to self-regulation in response to perceived incompetence in governance. In the YouTube comments a frequent discourse is that of parental responsibility: *“The blame is on the irresponsible parents, not Facebook”* (Appendix B, p. 100) and *“The parents are acting like it's the CEO's responsibility to monitor their children instead of them”* (Appendix B, p. 64). Because the users do not accept the legitimacy of the committee members, they advocate for individual responsibility, particularly as parents, and for closer self-governance. Responsibility is negotiated within the comments section, reflecting the construction of knowledge and truth among users, as illustrated in the following example:

First comment: *“That is exactly the case here. There is gross negligence on social media's part to increase user traffic and maximize profits within the organization at an unregulated level of safety for its users. “(Appendix B, p. 68)*

Second comment: *“They're just putting the blame to the owners to get compensation or because they're afraid to admit that they failed as a parent. It isn't because of the app or the platform but how they were able to raise their children. Sorry for your losses but if they want to sue social media might as well close it all out, who would want that?” (Appendix B, p. 68)*

In the first comment, a user argue that social media companies are not regulating platforms sufficiently. However, this view is then countered by another user, who argues, that the responsibility should still lie solely with the parents. Here, disciplinary power can be seen originating first from the hearing, where users internalize discourses, but then also between the users as they try to convince each other of their understanding of the right way to govern social media platforms and draw on their respective sources of knowledge and truth regimes of reality. Foucault's metaphor of panopticism can thus be applied to highlight how power dynamics between the committee members, CEOs, and users are influenced by surveillance and persuasion.

### **5.2.2.3 Governing the Population**

As accounted for in the textual analysis, the committee members can be seen as speaking on behalf of the U.S. Congress and addressing the regulation of social media platforms to protect the population. This aligns with Foucault's concept of biopower, an inherent mechanism of biopolitics wherein power is exercised over entire populations to control life and ensure health in general (Foucault, 2020, p. 253-254). This power dynamic is reflected in the hearing when the committee members state:

*“In 2021, NCMEC received a total of 139 reports of Sextortion. In 2023, through the end of October alone, this number skyrocketed to more than 22,000. More than a dozen children have died by suicide after becoming victims of this crime. This disturbing growth in child sexual exploitation is driven by one thing: changes in technology” (Appendix A, p. 4, ll. 70-74).*

The member highlights the negative impact that social media platforms have on people in general. Firstly, they showcase that this is a widespread phenomenon by drawing on statistics. They also argue that the development and spread of technology, such as social media platforms, leads to increased

rates of suicide among children. Regulating social media and making it safer becomes a form of biopolitical mechanism to keep the population safe. The aim, then, is to regulate this media, first and foremost to protect and optimize the future population for the nation to thrive. This is further confirmed by another member who states, *“When we had cigarettes killing people, we did something about it”* (Appendix A, p. 6, l. 134). By comparing the platforms to smoking, which has previously been restricted for public health, a clear line is drawn to the need for these kinds of regulations from the U.S. Congress in governing people.

Inherent in biopower, as part of a normalization process of society, Foucault argues that state racism can be found (Foucault, 2020, p. 257) This can be seen when the committee member addresses Chew, CEO of TikTok: *“I know when every single one of those Americans is in danger from the fact that you track their keystrokes, you track their app usage, you track their location data, and we know that all of that information can be accessed by Chinese employees who are subject to the ties of the Chinese Communist Party. Why should you not be banned in this country?”* (Appendix A, p. 68, 1656-1659). Because TikTok is owned by ByteDance, a Chinese-based company, data about the American population could be a risk to the life and health of Americans. In this example, the member refers to data such as keystrokes and location data as being dangerous for China to gain access to. China is therefore positioned as part of an 'us' and 'them' narrative, where the gathering of data is not inherently dangerous, but the possibility of other nations gaining access to it poses a risk.

The narrative presented by the committee members is not universally accepted among users. One user state: *“Their main reason is not about the protection of children but probably something more than just suicides probably something dealing with wars and world politics”* (Appendix B, p. 46), arguing that the committee members' primary agenda is not to protect children or prevent suicides but to use it as an excuse to address geopolitical issues. This frames the members as not prioritizing individual concerns but rather focusing on national issues. The users' skepticism of the members' discourses highlights a disconnect between the members' aim to protect the population, especially children, and the perceived motives of the committee. This skepticism can be seen as a resistance to the biopolitical strategies employed by America, where the regulation of social media platforms is presented as a protective measure but is instead viewed as an excuse for playing a broader geopolitical game.

But other users do seem to accept the biopolitical strategies, and accept the narrative of TikTok being a threat to them: *“Hey man lets understand each other if it comes down to a national security issue*

*the f!@k tik tok period “ (Appendix B, p. 51) and “I will delete tick-tock today” (p. 55)* By agreeing that TikTok is a national security issue, and in agreeing to delete the app, the two users reflect an internalization of the biopolitical discourse. They are responding to the perceived need to protect themselves and their nation, thereby reinforcing the government’s biopolitical strategies.

#### **5.2.2.4 Sub-conclusion**

Underlying power dynamics of both disciplinary power and biopower can be found between the committee members, the five CEOs, and YouTube users in discussing the regulation of social media platforms. These dynamics shape the governance of social media through the negotiation of knowledge and truth regimes constructed within the hearing, the comment section, and the interactions between the two. Drawing on Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, content moderation where users play a significant role in regulating each other is seen as a viable option for protecting children online. Surveillance is already an integral part of social media platforms and is accepted for public moderation. This extends to private comments, where companies should monitor better, and users should have the option to share their experiences and ask other users to review their interactions for safety. The power dynamic is evident in the interaction between committee members and CEOs, as viewed and reacted to by users. Committee members are often mocked in the comment section, indicating that users might not accept their arguments, possibly due to their manner of interaction or perceived lack of relevant traits, such as age. This leads users to emphasize parental responsibility, suggesting that parents should monitor their children better instead of relying on the committee members' arguments.

Biopower, and more specifically biopolitics, can be found in the committee members' framing of questions about regulating social media to keep the population, especially children, safe. When addressing TikTok, a mechanism of state racism emerges, positioning TikTok as an enemy due to its ties to China. This biopolitical strategy is discussed by users, with some viewing it as committee members avoiding accountability and others accepting it as valid, claiming to delete the app to protect national interests.

## 6. Discussion

The findings in the analysis provide insight into the discourses surrounding the regulation of social media platforms in 2024. They also reflect the negotiation of accountability between Committee members, CEOs, and users of platforms such as YouTube, identifying underlying power dynamics in their shaping and regulation. However, these findings are constructed from a series of choices made throughout the research, some of which have limitations. These choices and limitations will be discussed in the following section.

This thesis aimed to answer the overall problem formulation:

*What discourses are constructed concerning regulations of online safety for children in the case of 'Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis', and how do these reflect the negotiation of accountability and the underlying power dynamics in governing social media platforms among the US Congress, social media companies, and individuals in 2024?*

The analysis was structured around three research questions, which provided structure and an in-depth focus throughout the study. Each section offered insights into the interpretation of how social media platforms are discussed and governed among the US Congress, social media companies, and individuals in 2024.

### 6.1 Discourses on regulations

In examining the discourses constructed on regulations of protecting children online, in the context of *'Big Tech and The Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis,'* it became apparent that multiple perspectives regarding implementation measures, responsibility, and accountability were negotiated throughout. The primary interest of the committee members appeared to be ensuring the safety of not only children but also the American population, asking social media companies to account for their safety measures or lack thereof on the platforms. The social media companies advocated for collaborative regulation, while users emphasized parental responsibility.

These findings both align with and contradict some of the studies reviewed in the literature for this thesis. For example, while Demaske (2021) discusses how social media platforms are often governed by policymakers with a focus on users' rights, such as free speech, this study found a different emphasis. During the analysis, it became clear that the primary concerns were not human rights like

free speech and information. Instead, there was a stronger focus on control and moderation. This shift may be attributed to the hearing's primary focus on protecting children and limiting harmful content. The normative discourse throughout the hearing framed exploitative or violating content as immoral. Privacy rights were not prioritized in this context, as such content was seen as not warranting privacy considerations. Similarly, public surveillance was generally viewed positively, seen as a means to prevent predators from targeting children in private spaces. Among users, parental supervision was highlighted as a positive and necessary measure to keep children safe. Consequently, the focus on the privacy of children and predators was not part of the negotiation, as moderation was deemed essential to maintaining a secure internet environment for children.

However, regarding national security, particularly concerning TikTok, privacy protection became more relevant. Chander and Sun (2023) argue in their book *'From the Digital Silk Road to the Return of the State'* that data control has become a significant factor in ensuring national dominance over the internet. Inherent in this development is the notion of protecting national data to ensure national security and sovereignty. This is reflected in the discourses concerning TikTok, highlighting why privacy has become a major concern for congressional members. Considering these arguments, protecting America's national interest is paramount. The primary concern on the social media platform is not children and predators, but rather the foreign power of China, which poses a risk to children who are generally not sufficiently safeguarded online.

## **6.2 Limitation of theory**

In utilizing Dawson's framework of normative goods (2022) to the case of this thesis some limitations with the theory were found. The four norms, even though well accounted for in the article, were in practice hard to apply to the text without risking becoming too subjective. For example, determining whether someone is open enough or presents an argument in an open enough manner is difficult without potentially framing reality to fit a specific argument. The norms were also hard to decipher from each other, as being non-arbitrary can also rely on the members and companies being open about their reasoning. All norms can, therefore, be seen to impact each other in one way or another toward taking accountability. Though all four norms could be identified through the analysis, this still showed empirical validation of the theory applied.

To assess power dynamics, Michel Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power (1991) and biopower (2020) are employed. A limitation in applying Michel Foucault's thoughts is that his concepts

originated in the 1970s, predating the internet and social media platforms. While these concepts can be argued to be relevant to today's society and have been conceptualized in a modern setting, it is essential to recognize that they were not originally formulated with this specific context in mind. Therefore, the concepts might not capture all the complexities, but they nevertheless offer insight into the power dynamics at play.

### **6.3 Trustworthiness of the study**

In discussing the methodological choices made in this thesis, the three measures of trustworthiness of *credibility*, *transferability*, and *reflectivity*, as accounted for in the methodology section, will be considered.

The empirical data utilized in this thesis comprises transcripts from a congressional hearing and YouTube comments from three different comment sections. In analyzing the discourses on how social media is regulated, this data provided two perspectives, thereby heightening the credibility of the overall findings. The committee members could be interpreted as reflecting the interests of the public, but the analysis of YouTube comments revealed that discourses among users often differed from the perspectives formed within the hearing. Additionally, the dualistic relationship between these perspectives could be further explored. To further enhance the credibility of the findings, additional data collection methods could be employed to triangulate the results. For instance, interviews with policymakers or company representatives could provide deeper insights into the discourses formed in other settings. Similarly, surveys or interviews with YouTube users could offer a more in-depth understanding of the specific meanings behind comments, thereby limiting the risk of different forms of hidden biases throughout.

To ensure transferability, the methodological steps and theoretical lens have been described in depth. Additionally, all empirical data have been included in the appendices, enabling others to review the findings and transparently follow the interpretations, thereby allowing others to transfer the findings to other settings or studies. Drawing on reflectiveness, ethical considerations about data collection and utilization were included in the methodological section. Moreover, the limitations of theory and methods were presented and discussed to maintain transparency. As part of the philosophical stance of social constructivism, which posits that reality is continually constructed, any findings in this thesis

are interpretations that also reflect the choices made by the researcher. By transparently accounting for methods, theory, and similar studies, the preunderstanding has been clearly articulated to minimize biases throughout.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis examines the discourses surrounding the regulation of social media companies in 2024, focusing on the negotiation of accountability and the underlying power dynamics shaping the governing measures taken. The main findings show various narratives of responsibility within the US Congress, social media companies, and individuals. Through an analysis of the textual and discursive features of the congressional hearing on '*Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis*' and reactions through YouTube comments, multiple perspectives on regulation were identified.

During the hearing, committee members undertook the role of protectors of children and the American population, emphasizing their commitment to online safety from a national viewpoint. Textual devices were identified such as pathos-laden language and metaphors to underscore the need for increased corporate responsibility from social media companies. The CEOs, representing experts on behalf of their companies, were questioned about the regulatory measures implemented on their platforms to protect children online. In response, they defended their companies' efforts, drawing on moral discourses to emphasize their commitment to child protection and highlighting collaborative efforts between policymakers and users to enhance platform safety. The YouTube Users reacted to the discussions by either agreeing with or arguing against them, thus socially constructing their views on the topic. Among users, the responsibility for regulating social media to protect children was mainly seen as a parental duty, not solely that of politicians and companies, contrasting with the discourses formed within the hearing.

A theoretical framework was employed to better understand how the discourses on social media regulation reflected the negotiation of accountability and underlying power dynamics between the three entities. Accountability was analyzed through the norms of openness, non-arbitrariness, effectiveness, and publicness to gain insight into the level of accountability demanded of the CEOs and demonstrated by the committee members. The findings revealed that all norms were invoked

throughout the hearing, indicating that the CEOs negotiated varying levels of accountability with the committee members. The success of this negotiation depended on the topic discussed and the discourses involved. For example, the CEO of Discord successfully took accountability by being open about their regulatory efforts and implementing effective moderation features to protect children. In contrast, the CEO of TikTok was less successful in negotiating accountability, as reflected by the committee members and users despite arguing for the protection of American users' data. The negotiation of accountability revealed itself to be multifaceted and continually constructed between actors, showing that the norms concerning social media governance are still evolving as of 2024, influenced by diverse perspectives and interests.

The concepts of disciplinary power and biopower were employed to access the underlying power dynamics of social media regulations. The analysis showed that public surveillance of social media platforms was viewed positively for keeping children safe online, revealing disciplinary power as an effective means for people to control each other and adhere to norms. In this context, privacy was considered less important than safety, illustrating how disciplinary power through mutual regulation is a highly accepted form of governance in modern society. Moreover, biopower was evident in the regulatory initiatives proposed by committee members, where discourses concerning the protection of the American population and national security were prominent. This highlights an underlying agenda of governing American citizens to ensure public health and regulate platforms. An underlying form of state racism emerged, revealing geopolitical issues and the threat of foreign powers embedded in the debate. These power dynamics also influence users, encouraging them to self-regulate to protect themselves and their children online.

Overall, this thesis contributes to understanding how social media regulation is negotiated and enacted in contemporary society, reflecting broader societal values and power structures. The findings illustrate that the governance of social media platforms is not only a matter of technical regulation but is a part of social, political, and ethical considerations. This research underscores the need to critically examine how regulatory measures are developed and implemented, ensuring that they balance safety, privacy, and accountability in an increasingly digital world.

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