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Beyond essentialism and instrumentalism: A “contextualist” approach to digital governance based on Islamic political-educational philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of cyberspace as a "new biosphere" has revealed the inefficiency of conventional governance models in facing the moral and semantic crises of this space. The present study, with the aim of formulating a model of "educational governance" based on the thought of the Imams of the Islamic Revolution, has used a combined method of "content analysis" to extract the foundations and "practical analogy" to design the model. The research findings show that by going beyond the duality of "instrumentalism" and "essentialism," the theory of "educational contextualism" should be accepted as an autonomous paradigm. Accordingly, cyberspace has a fluid nature, whose orientation is subject to the "atmosphere of Wilayah' (Guardianship)" that governs it. The final achievement of this research is to present a three-level governance model (fundamentals, principles, and mechanisms) in which the Islamic state, by moving from the passive position of "regulator," is placed in the active position of "contextual architect." The operational strategy of this model is to transition from the traditional paradigm of "user advice" to "virtue architecture" in the technical layer; in such a way that, by utilizing "value-sensitive design" and "virtue-based algorithms," choosing good becomes easier for the user and choosing evil becomes costly for the user.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Problem Statement: From Communication Tools to “New Lifeworld”

The history of human life on Earth has always been the scene of the “perfectionist man”’s struggle to expand his existence and to overcome natural limitations. This innate desire, which is embedded in human beings, has prevented them from remaining static and has been the main driver of the transition from various civilizational eras, from the agricultural era to the industrial revolution. However, the emergence of “cyberspace” in recent decades has confronted humanity with an ontological break, the nature of which is different from all previous technological innovations. Cyberspace is no longer simply a collection of hardware and software to facilitate matters; points out, this space has emerged as a “new Lifeworld” (Lifeworld); a space based on information and communication technology that, in dialectical interaction with humans, has formed an intertwined network of production, processing, and distribution of meaning.

In this new paradigm, the contemporary human lifeworld has undergone a transformation, and the boundaries between physical and digital realities are disappearing. The main issue of the present research is that conventional governance models (both liberal and secular), due to the reduction of this phenomenon to a purely “technical” or “economic” matter, have become powerless in the face of the moral and semantic crises that arise from it. Recent studies emphasize that Western ethical frameworks often fail to cover the cultural and spiritual dimensions of AI governance in Islamic societies, necessitating a pluralistic approach rooted in theology ([Hayat & Arif, 2024](#)). If we consider cyberspace not as a peripheral tool, but as the “environment” of humans, the question of governing it becomes a question of “human education” and “the goal of social life.” Ignoring this essential change and making non-comprehensive decisions by rulers is due to the lack of a coherent philosophical system in analyzing the essence of space.

1.2. Theoretical Gap: The Double Deadlock of “Instrumentalism” and “Essentialism”

In the literature on the philosophy of technology, the analysis of the nature of cyberspace is mainly caught in two opposing poles, both of which prevent the presentation of an efficient governance model (especially in the context of the Islamic state):

1.2.1 Criticism of instrumentalism

The first approach considers technology and cyberspace to be “neutral” and mere tools in the hands of humans. This simplistic view, which ignores the structural agency of technology, believes that the will of the user alone determines whether it is good or evil. This is while phenomenological evidence shows that new technologies, by changing “lifestyle” and creating new structures (such as changing the concept of time, place, and identity), change the nature of human interactions independently of the users’ intentions ([Boroumand, 2018](#)).

1.2.2 Criticism of Essentialism

On contrast, the essentialist approach (influenced by Heideggerian thought) considers technology to have a dominant, coercive, and unchangeable nature. In this view, cyberspace is a kind of “aggressive development” or “Ge-stell” that reduces nature and even humans to a “Bestand” and

traps them in a cycle of aggressive development ([Heidegger, 1994](#)); a situation that, in the reading of Muslim thinkers, has been interpreted as a “perversion” of human truth and captivity in the “hidden magic” of tools ([Avini, 1990](#)). Although this approach is profound in the critique of modernity, it is in conflict with the anthropological foundations of Islam, which emphasize human agency and responsibility, owing to its association with “technological determinism” and promotion of passivity. By instilling the absolute dominance of technology, essentialism practically blocks the way to any “active governance” and “reform” and seeks the only way out by waiting for a savior or the destruction of civilization ([Mansouri, 2015](#)).

Therefore, the existing theoretical gap is the lack of an approach that, while accepting the deep structural effects of technology, that is, beyond the tool, recognizes human agency and the possibility of its moral guidance beyond its inherent coerciveness.

1.3. Main claim: Turning to “contextualism” and educational governance

Going beyond the aforementioned duality, this research defends a third approach called “contextualism.” The main argument of this article is that the nature of cyberspace is determined neither by its technological nature nor by the individual intention of the user, but by its “context” and “governing atmosphere.” Similar to the concept of “context” in the principles of jurisprudence, which clarifies the meaning of a text in its temporal and spatial context ([Sadr, 1997](#)), cyberspace, like “language” or “world” as a human ecosystem, is a container whose orientation is subject to the “system of Wilayah” (Guardianship system) and the atmosphere that governs it. Accordingly, a transition from secular governance to “educational governance” is proposed. In this model, which is inspired by the political thought of Imam Khomeini (RA) and Ayatollah Khamenei, the government’s duty is not limited to regulation; rather, its main mission is to “engineer the ground” for the growth of moral virtues. The article claims that by changing the “playground” and architecture of cyberspace based on monotheistic values, the threats of this space can be transformed into an opportunity for “collective education” and the realization of a new Islamic civilization.

2. Methods

This research is “fundamental-developmental” in terms of purpose and “Thematic Analysis” and “Deductive Inference” in terms of method, which is organized in four operational steps:

2.1. Research scope and selection criteria The statistical population of the research was selected in two distinct sections

A) Sources of the philosophy of technology: Focus on the classic works of “Martin Heidegger” (as a representative of essentialism) and the works of “Andrew Feinberg” and “Peter Paul Verbeek” (as representatives of the critical and moderate approach). The selection criteria were “scientific authority” and “subjective affinity with the discussion of the agency of objects.”

B) Sources of Islamic thought: The exclusive focus is on the intellectual systems of Imam Khomeini (RA) and Ayatollah Khamenei (Mudzaleh). The reason for this monopoly is their position as “jurists-rulers” who have taken jurisprudence from the abstract to the realm of “system

building.” Search keywords include “technology,” “cyberspace,” “education,” “wilayah,” and “reform.”

2.2. The stages of analysis and inference The process of achieving the proposed model was carried out in the following stages

2.2.1 Deconstruction

First, the central propositions of the two competing paradigms (instrumentalism and essentialism) were extracted and criticized using the anthropological foundations of Islam (free will and nature).

2.2.2 Coding and Categorizing

By reviewing all the relevant statements and writings of the Imams of the Revolution, basic themes (such as the impact of the environment on morality, the role of the government in reforming society, and the negation of foreign dominance (Nafy al-Sabil) in tools) were extracted and categorized into macro categories.

2.2.3 Theory Building

By combining the findings of the first stage (gaps in Western philosophy) and the second stage (capacities of Islamic wisdom), the concept of "educational contextualism" was formulated as the central signifier.

2.2.4 Modeling

Finally, using the “practical analogy” method, the theoretical foundations were translated into policy solutions (such as choice architecture) and presented in the form of a three-level model.

3. Results

To demonstrate the rigorous process of extracting concepts from the primary sources (statements of the Imams of the Islamic Revolution), a sample of the thematic analysis and coding process is presented in Table 1 This table illustrates how raw textual extracts were transformed into initial codes and subsequently categorized into overarching themes.

Table 1.

Sample of the Thematic Analysis and Coding Process⁴. Discussion.

Main Theme	Initial Code	Original Extract / Meaning Unit
Systemic Purification / Government as Educator	-Duty to provide virtuous conditions -Opposition to tyrannical environment	"[We] are obliged to provide favorable social conditions for educating faithful and virtuous individuals. And these conditions are the exact opposite of the conditions of the tyrannical rule of unjust powers."(Khomeini, 2002)
Active Guardianship / Rejection of Instrumental Neutrality	-Danger of passive governance -Responsibility to protect users	"Abandoning people in this space [cyberspace] is an example of 'leaving them defenseless' against cultural invasion."(Khamenei, 2020)

Main Theme	Initial Code	Original Extract / Meaning Unit
Collective Education / Changing the Playing Field	-Insufficiency of individual media literacy -Necessity of environmental reform	"Against the organized invasion of the enemy that pollutes the 'environment', one cannot be satisfied with individual defense alone, but must form a 'front' and change the atmosphere..." (Khamenei, 2020)
Virtue Architecture	-Realizing good and evil through context -Focus on systemic education	"If the environment is healthy, achieving perfection and virtue becomes easy; if the environment is corrupt, becoming virtuous is extremely difficult." (Implicit core logic extracted from the analysis of Wilayah)

In the face of technology and cyber governance, the existing literature can be analyzed in a three-layer spectrum. Drawing this map is essential for the precise positioning of the theory proposed in this study.

The classical spectrum (the essence/instrument bipolar): On the one hand, there is the “instrumentalism” approach that considers technology to be neutral. On the other hand, there is the classical “essentialism” that considers technology to be an inevitable fate of humanity.

The empirical turn and middle-of-the-road approaches: In recent decades, philosophers of technology have moved towards more objective analyses by criticizing the abstraction of essentialism. Currents such as “Post-phenomenology” represented by Don Ihde and Peter Paul Verbeek focus on the concept of “mediation” and show that although technology does not have an independent will, it has a “technological intentionality” and shapes human perception and morality (Verbeek, 2011). In addition, Andrew Feinberg, in “Critical Theory,” proposes “technical coding” to democratize the design of technology. In the sociological layer, “Platform Studies” and theories of “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff, 2019) criticize the political economy behind the curtain of tools.

The necessity of moving to the paradigm of “educational contextualism”: Although second-tier approaches (empirical turn) are considered a step forward from Heideggerian determinism and recognize the agency of designers, from the perspective of Islamic wisdom, they still have two fundamental weaknesses:

A) Secularism in the end: Most of these theories, even in Verbeek’s ethical approaches, consider the end of governance to be “welfare,” “democratic freedom,” or “normative morality,” and lack the horizon of “existential perfection” and “divine proximity.”

B) Neglect of the “ruling spirit” (wilayah): These theories see the impact of technology in the “user interface” or “economics” layer, but they are oblivious to the impact of the “designer’s psychology” and the “wilayah atmosphere” on the atmosphere of the tool.

The present study, by accepting the technical achievements of "post-phenomenology" on the mediation of technology and "platform studies" on the architecture of choice, attempts to reinterpret these mechanisms in an Islamic epistemological system and presents the theory of "educational contextualism" as a complement and sublimation of these trends.

3.1. Critique of essentialism: Technology is the inevitable "fate" of man

Despite the emergence of new theories, the essence/tool duality still dominates the public policy-making layer of Iran and the Islamic world, so their criticism is a prelude to entering the discussion. Essentialists believe that modern technology has an "independent nature" of human will; a nature that is not necessarily technical, but rather a kind of "way of developing truth" or worldview that has cast a shadow over all aspects of human life. Martin Heidegger, the most prominent philosopher of this movement, argues by re-reading the etymology of the Greek word "Techne" that modern technology no longer means "processing" and the revelation of truth, but rather a kind of "attack" on nature.

a) Ge-stell (Enframing) and Challenging Revealing: From Heidegger's perspective (1933), modern technology packages the world into a specific, disciplined, and packaged framework that he calls "Ge-stell." Under Ge-stell (Enframing), nature and even humans are removed from their original position and reduced to "Bestand" or extractable energy. This view is not simply a change in the means of production, but a fundamental change in "man's relationship to being." When this view prevails, humans are no longer subject to knowledge but are themselves swallowed up in the technological process. describes this situation as follows: in essentialism, any attempt to reform will be nothing more than an extension of the dominance of technology, because computational thinking has also overshadowed all solutions.

b) Essentialist reading in contemporary Iranian thought: This approach is also reflected among Iranian thinkers. Seyyed Morteza Avini, influenced by this view, considers the relationship between humans and communication technologies (such as cinema and television) to be a "possessive" and "hidden magic" relationship. [Avini \(1990\)](#) believes that as technological tools move towards automation and complexity, they create "invisible prison walls" that limit human free will. In this reading, technology is inherently associated with the "dominance of technology" and transforms humans in the face of its "magical allure." Others, such as [Fardid \(2002\)](#), have gone further and considered modern technology a sign of "divine wrath" and its essence as "evil" that will ultimately lead to the destruction of the planet.

c) Theological-philosophical criticism: the association of essentialism with nihilism and determinism is not without fundamental epistemological flaws. The most important criticism of the essentialist approach is that it provides the ground for the growth of "nihilistic" and "deterministic" philosophies ([Mansouri, 2015](#)). When technology is portrayed as an inevitable fate, human agency is denied. Heidegger, one of the greatest philosophers of this genre, does not offer a human way out at the end of the article "The Question of Technology," and seeks the only way out of the domination of "Ge-stell" in the emergence of a "savior." This reading leads to the promotion of despair, inaction, and isolation and is considered a clear example of "determinism" in the theological logic of Islam. In this all-round domination, there is no will for man, and every activity is influenced by technology and interpreted in accordance with its expansion. More dangerously, in the logic of determinism, any attempt to change the status quo is not only fruitless, but also considered "contrary" and "sin"; because such efforts are considered a battle and struggle against divine destiny and the will of the ruler of existence ([Yasrebi, 2019](#)). This historical passivity is in clear contradiction with the Quranic principle of "negating the coercive domination of evil."

God Almighty has explicitly negated the coercive domination of Satan and the manifestations of evil (“Indeed, My servants, you have no authority over them”; Al-Isra’, 65) and considers happiness and misery to be the product of human choice (“Indeed, We have guided him to the path, whether he is grateful or ungrateful”; Al-Insan, 3). Therefore, accepting essentialism means disarming man against virtual space and accepting defeat before the fight.

3.2. Critique of Instrumentalism: The Illusion of Neutrality and Neglect of Structures

At the opposite pole is “instrumentalism,” which considers technology to be a neutral phenomenon subject to the user’s intention to use it. Although this approach preserves human agency, it fails to understand the “structural effects” of technology on society. Technology is never a passive tool; rather, it changes the “lifeworld.” The introduction of technology into society creates a network of new requirements and structures. For example, the invention of the automobile did not simply change the speed of movement but also transformed the architecture of cities, legal rules, economic structures (fuel, insurance), and even the concept of time and space (Firouzabadi, 2020). These effects are more profound in cyberspace. Platforms and algorithms, through the “architecture of choice,” direct users’ tastes and promote particular lifestyles. Boroumand (2018) argue that social values are inherent in technical designs and determine how humans communicate. Therefore, reducing cyberspace to a neutral tool is superficial and deprives the ruler of understanding the deeper layers of technology’s impact on society. As Motahari (2015, p. 144) points out, although humans should not be “subjugated by machines,” denying the environmental effects of machines and the structures that emerge from them is also ignoring reality.

3.3. Proposed Theory: Contextualism

By critiquing the two approaches above, this study proposes the theory of “contextualism.” It is worth noting that contextualism here is distinct from theories such as “social constructionism” (SCOT), which sees technology as merely the product of social agreements and the interpretations of human groups (Pinch & Bijker, 1984). It is also different from the “Affordance” theory, which considers technology to be merely a potential for action (Gibson, 1979). In the model of this research, “Context” is not simply the social context, but also the “governing atmosphere” and “macro-dominant orientation” that overshadows the ecosystem. Accordingly, the nature of cyberspace is neither “inherently evil” nor “inherently neutral”; rather, its nature is determined by the dialectical interaction between “technical requirements” and “dominant dominion over the context.”

A) Analogy to “language”: From the plagues of the tongue to the abode of revelation Cyberspace is inextricably similar in its nature to “language.” Language is the first communication medium and the product of the credit sphere of the human mind, which divided human life into two periods: pre-language and post-language. Just as language is the bedrock of the emergence of vices such as lies, slander, backbiting, and disbelief, and has a large chapter in the narrative sources under the title "Pests of the Tongue" (Mohammadi Reyshahri, 2007), cyberspace is also the bedrock of spreading lies and corruption. However, the logic of Islam in the face of this "contamination" has never been "rejecting the tongue" or "absolute silence." God Almighty revealed His eternal miracle (the Holy Quran) precisely in this bedrock, contaminated with the lies of ignorance, and

transformed the tongue into a tool of guidance. Therefore, bedrock contamination is not evidence of the corruption of the essence. The solution to Islam is not to cut off the tongue but to "educate the speaker" and change the content flowing through the channel of the tongue. Cyberspace, as the new language of humanity, although today it is contaminated with the rule of the tyrant, has the potential to become a bedrock of monotheistic messages and a tool for imposing justice by changing the "context."

B) Analogy to "the world": From the top of all sins to the fields of the hereafter The second and deeper analogy is the identification of cyberspace with the concept of "the world" in Islamic theology. Cyberspace is not merely a tool; like the world, it is a "lifeworld" that has reconstructed all real institutions (economy, politics, culture) within itself ([Firouzabadi, 2020](#)). In Islamic wisdom, the world is "indispensable" in relation to happiness and misery; that is, it is a pure capacity and does not have a good or evil orientation. It is "human orientation" and "the governing authority over the environment" that determine its nature. For someone who breathes in the material atmosphere, the world is "the head of all sins" and a source of pride; But for the saints of God who live in a monotheistic atmosphere, this world is the "trading house of the saints of God" and the "farm of the Hereafter." The key point here is that the existence of harm in the world is not a license to "leave the world" or, as religious literature puts it, "monasticism." Islam does not consider asceticism to mean isolation; rather, it means managing attachments while actively participating in the context of society. SeerahThe divine prophets also testify that they went to the most polluted societies for reform, in order to change the structures in favor of virtue by changing the "atmosphere of society". Therefore, cyberspace is also "worldly" which, if under divine guardianship, is the ladder of perfection, and if under the guardianship of a tyrant, it will be the cause of human downfall.

c) Technology in the monotheistic atmosphere: Based on what has been explained in the explanation of the concept of "context" and the phenomenological analogies of "language" and "world", the central core of the theory of contextualism can be formulated. Based on this approach, although technology has structural requirements, these structures are not final, rigid, and unchangeable but are determined by interaction with the "context" and the "dominant value system." Professor Shahid Motahari, with a deep understanding of this dialectic, with a precise distinction between "science and industry" and "the ideology that governs it," believes that the crises of the modern world are not caused by the nature of the machine, but are the product of "human deviation" and the void of faith in Western human sciences. In his belief, if man's relationship with God is correct, a solid industry in man's hands is like a tool that can be used on the path to perfection ([Motahari, 2015, pp. 145–146](#)).

Therefore, the central claim and signifier of contextualism is as follows: Technology and cyberspace in the "material and secular atmosphere," due to the lack of a transcendent goal and the dominance of the ego, become tools of alienation, consumerism, and the expansion of neglect; A situation that can be considered not simply a degeneration, but a kind of "evil perfection" in which society is rapidly moving towards the realization of evil potentials and the rule of "illusion" ([Farhani & Taghavi, 2025](#)). However, in the "atmosphere of monotheism" and under "divine guardianship," this same technology changes its nature and becomes a tool for expanding justice,

promoting virtues, and “advocating for the truth.” This aligns with [Abdelnour \(2025\)](#) argument that an Islamic theology of technology must move beyond the 'mind-centered' AI to a 'heart-centered' approach, where technology serves the spiritual purification of the user. This approach breaks the previous theoretical deadlocks and paves the way for the model of “educational governance”; a model in which the task of the Islamic ruler is not a blind war with technology based on essentialism nor its passive release in the eyes of instrumentalism, but rather his mission is to “seize the field,” “change the atmosphere governing cyberspace,” and engineer the ecosystem based on divine criteria.

3.4. Philosophical Explanation of “Educational Contextualism” and Its Distinctions

To disambiguate the concept of “Contextualism” in this research and distinguish it from similar concepts in the social and cognitive sciences, it is necessary to define this theory precisely based on the three pillars of ontology, causality, and agency:

a) Ontology of Context: What is the context? Here, “context” is not equivalent to physical context or merely social conditions (as in SCOT). In Sadr'i wisdom and the thought of the Imams of the Revolution, context is the “virtuous atmosphere governing the ecosystem.” More precisely, technology and platforms embody the will and sensuality of their rulers. Therefore, context is a “current spirit” that can be the spirit of “taghut” (developer of negligence) or the spirit of “divine” (developer of remembrance). This context determines the general direction of the movement in space.

B) Mechanism of influence: The relationship between context and behavior The key difference between this theory and “essentialism” is the type of causality. In essentialism, technology is the “complete cause” of human transformation, which is interpreted as predestination. However, in educational contextualism, the relationship between context and user behavior is of the type of “preparatory cause.” Context does not force but creates a “requirement.” Similar to the concept of “Affordance”, context also “facilitates” some actions and “difficults” others. Our difference from Gibson's theory is that we believe that this facilitation is not neutral; rather, it has a “moral orientation.” A corrupt context makes sin “cheap and accessible” and virtue “costly and elusive.”

C) The position of human agency: In this theory, unlike instrumentalism, which considers humans to be absolute, human agency is “limited agency in context.” The user has the power to choose, but this power of choice is influenced by the “architecture of choice.” The art of educational governance is not the elimination of choice but rather the change of the “coefficient of probability of behavior” through the benevolent engineering of the context.

3.5. The core: The model of Islamic governance in cyberspace

Based on the theoretical foundations explained in the previous section, it was determined that cyberspace has a “contextual” nature, and its orientation towards happiness or misery is subject to the prevailing atmosphere and the current guardianship over it. This conclusion has profound implications for policymaking and governance. If we accept that “context” determines the nature of technology, then the inherent duty of the Islamic government will be “texture engineering” and “environmental purification.” This section, by moving away from secular governance models,

explains the pillars of “educational governance” in cyberspace based on the political thought of the Islamic Revolution’s Imams.

3.5.1. Ontological Foundations: From “User” to “Divine Caliph”

The distinguishing point of Islamic governance is its different definition of “human.” In the models of cyber governance prevalent in the West (whether the American free market model or the European regulatory model), humans are largely reduced to “users” or “data subjects” (GDPR, Art. 4, Para. 1) who have no rights beyond “access to information” and “contractual privacy.” However, in Islamic anthropology, humans are beings with inherent dignity and “Caliphs of God,” whose purpose of creation is “growth” and “evolution” in the context of divine proximity ([Khomeini, 2002](#)). Therefore, governance in cyberspace cannot be indifferent to the spiritual perfection and imperfections of humans. In this paradigm, the legitimacy of exercising sovereignty in cyberspace does not stem from a social contract, but rather from an extension of “divine guardianship.” The Islamic government is obligated to organize cyberspace in such a way that it provides a platform for "rational growth" and a "good life" for humans, not just for entertainment purposes.

3.5.2. The nature of the state: transition from “Regulator” to “Educator”

According to what has been mentioned, one of the essential differences between Islamic governance and liberal models is the definition of the “mission of the state.” The modern liberal state considers itself a “regulator” whose duty is to manage data traffic, ensure net neutrality and infrastructure security, and remain neutral towards value content. However, in Islamic political thought, the state has the status of an “educator” and “guardian.”

a) Transition from individual education to structural reform: In contrast to the liberal approach that considers the state to be merely a neutral observer, in Islamic thought, the state is responsible for the happiness of society. Ayatollah Khamenei, likening society to a “humanization factory,” considers individual education in a corrupt environment to be ineffective and emphasizes “system reform” ([Khamenei, 2013](#)). On this basis, in educational governance, the focus changes from “user advice” and an individual-centered approach to “platform purification” in the sense of a systemic approach, so that virtue becomes a structural requirement of the environment.

B) Government as a necessary condition for education: Imam Khomeini (RA) also argues that, by linking “political power” to “education,” in the shadow of the “tyrant system” and the polytheistic environment, educating a righteous person is impossible or very difficult. He says:

“[We] are obliged to provide favorable social conditions for educating faithful and virtuous individuals. And these conditions are the exact opposite of the conditions of the tyrannical rule of unjust powers.” ([Khomeini, 2002, p. 35](#)). This view is based on the principle of “the correspondence of individual and social perfection”; This means that the structure of society as a large universe reflects the existential structure of man, or the microcosm, and if the system governing cyberspace revolves around "illusion" and "evil," the possibility of the growth of virtues in users will be structurally blocked ([Farhani & Taghavi, 2025](#)).

Accordingly, if cyberspace is governed by capitalist, colonial, and tyrant algorithms, its outcome will be "corruption." Therefore, "gaining power" and "exercising sovereignty" in cyberspace are an obligatory prelude to "human education." In the words of the Leader of the Revolution, abandoning people in this space is an example of "leaving them defenseless" against cultural invasion, and the Islamic state is obliged to leave the position of "passivity" and take over the management of this space in favor of divine values.

3.5.3. Legal and Policy Requirements: Distributive and Cognitive Justice

This paradigm shift creates objective requirements at the level of law and policy at Table 2.

A) Cognitive Justice: In educational governance, justice is not limited to “universal access to the Internet” (Digital Divide); it also includes “justice in information architecture.” Algorithms should not be designed to exploit the user’s mind by creating a “filter bubble” (Pariser, 2011) or highlighting the yellow content. Preventing “mental exploitation” by large platforms ...is an example of the 'Negation of Dominance' (Nafy al-Sabil) and justice.

B) User rights as “human rights” and “trust”: In Islamic jurisprudence, user data and privacy are not commercial goods, but rather “trust.” The ruler is obliged to protect this trust from theft or abuse by commercial entities. In addition, the moral and psychological security of families in cyberspace is an example of "human rights" that the government guarantees.

Table 2.

Comparative comparison of the pillars and components of the secular governance model and educational governance.

Level of Analysis	Component in Secular Model	Component in Educational (Islamic) Governance Model	Reference to Article (Section No.)
Ontology	Cyberspace as a “data market” or “neutral tool”	Cyberspace as an “ecosystem” (analogous to the world/language)	Section 1.1 (New Biological Domain) & Section 2.3 (Analogy to Language and World)
Anthropology	User; passive, pleasure-seeking, commercial subject	Caliph of God (Khalifah Allah); perfection-oriented, endowed with fitrah and dignity	Section 3.1 (Ontological Foundations: From User to Divine Caliph)
Epistemology	Free flow of information (relativism of truth)	Rights-based and cognitive justice (prevention of mental exploitation)	Section 3.3 (Legal Requirements: Cognitive Justice & Filter Bubble)
Governance Purpose	Platform profitability, security control, or network neutrality	“Establishment of Justice” and “Growth of Moral Virtues” (Systemic Purification)	Section 1.3 (Engineering Context for Growth) & Section 3.1 (Virtuous Life)
Role of Government	Regulator and external supervisor (traffic/security)	Educator and Context Engineer (Facilitator of Ethical Formation)	Section 3.2 (Nature of Government: From Regulator to Guardian and Educator)
Macro Strategy	Risk management and media literacy (individual-centered advice)	Choice Architecture and Benevolent Engineering (System Reform)	Section 4.1 (Collective Education & Changing the Playing Field)

Level of Analysis	Component in Secular Model	Component in Educational (Islamic) Governance Model	Reference to Article (Section No.)
Technical Tool	Engagement-based algorithms	Value-sensitive algorithms	Section 4.2 (Choice Architecture: Algorithm as Educator)

3.6. Architecture of the “Educational Governance of Cyberspace” Model

To draw a big picture of the proposed model and demonstrate the logical continuity between the theoretical foundations and implementation solutions, the architecture of this model was formulated in the form of a three-layer structure (fundamental, principles, and implementation layers). Table 3 shows how abstract principles (why) are translated into governance principles (what) and ultimately into technical and objective mechanisms (how) through an analogical process, so that the overall geometry of the model is made available in a coherent manner while avoiding repetition of topics.

Table 3.

Three-level architecture of the educational governance model.

Level of Analysis (Key Question)	Focus Area	Key Components & Transitions
Level 1: Foundations and Ends	Philosophy & Political Theology	1. Ontology: Cyberspace as a “world” under the influence of Wilayah (transition from neutral tool)2. Anthropology: User as “trainee” and “Caliph of God,” influenced by environment (transition from passive commercial subject)3. Purpose: “Establishment of Justice” and “Facilitation of Existential Perfection” (beyond mere security or profit)
Level 2: Governance Principles	Macro-Policy	1. Principle of Systematic Guidance: Prioritizing platform structure reform over individual advice2. Principle of Platform Responsibility: Platforms’ accountability for the moral direction” of users (negation of neutrality)3. Principle of Blocking External Domination: Preventing foreign algorithms from controlling the tastes and cognition of the Islamic community
Level 3: Implementation Mechanisms	Technical & Engineering (Architecture)	1. Choice Architecture: Designing UI/UX so that Ethical Options are “default”2. Virtue-Oriented Algorithms: Rewriting reward functions to favor “rational” over “instinctual” content3. Incentives: Establishing spiritual-material reward systems for creators of elevated content

4. Discussion

4.1. Operational Strategy: Moving from Merely Explanatory Ideas to Virtue Architecture

Based on the theoretical foundations of “contextualism” and the “educational governance” model, the mission of the Islamic State is to change the atmosphere that governs cyberspace. However, how is this change in atmosphere achieved at the operational level? The main challenge of religious governance in the digital age is the ineffectiveness of traditional methods based on direct advice and counsel against the software power of the platforms. This section, by criticizing reductionist approaches such as relying on media literacy, proposes the “virtue architecture” strategy as an

alternative; a strategy in which moral and divine values are embedded not as cultural attachments, but in the “essence of technique” and the “coding layer.”

4.2. Collective Education, the Strategy of Islamic Governance

In the current paradigm, the burden of moral responsibility in cyberspace is mainly placed on the shoulders of the “end-user. Policymakers, emphasizing “media literacy” and “self-control,” attempt to vaccinate users against toxic waves. Although promoting individual awareness is essential, it is insufficient and inadequate as a governance strategy for the following reasons: (a) Criticizing individual views: An approach based on individual advice ignores the “structural” power of cyberspace. When intelligent algorithms, using cognitive science and behavioral psychology, are designed to push users towards vulgar, controversial, and instinctive content, they function similarly to “drugs” in Western civilization. By activating the “power of illusion” and involving the soul in fleeting pleasures, this mechanism effectively deprives users of the opportunity to think and “seriousness” making them susceptible to accepting the rule of the tyrant ([Farhani & Taghavi, 2025](#)). Therefore, in such circumstances, expecting “individual piety” from the general public is a kind of unrealistic idealism that is not feasible. As Ayatollah Khamenei emphasizes, against the organized invasion of the enemy that pollutes the “environment”, one cannot be satisfied with individual defense alone, but must form a “front” and change the atmosphere in favor of the right front b) Returning to the Prophets’ Way of Life: Changing the “Playing Field”: The educational governance of Islam, beyond educating the individual, seeks to “educate the system.” The way of life of the divine prophets shows that they did not only reform individuals; by establishing “Medina” and changing power relations, they provided a context in which “good” would be current and easy, and “evil” would be difficult and costly. In cyberspace, the Islamic State should also think about changing the “playing field” (platform) instead of focusing solely on changing the player (user). If the platform architecture is based on “extreme pluralism” or “sexual profiteering,” the outcome will naturally be secularism. The operational strategy here is to support the establishment and development of platforms whose governing logic facilitates the growth of moral virtue.

4.3. “Choice Architecture” Based on Divine Values

The concept of “choice architecture” in behavioral economics reflects the fact that the arrangement of options has a direct impact on people’s decision-making ([Thaler & Sunstein, 2008](#)). In cyberspace, this architecture is implemented by “algorithms” and “user interface designers” (UI/UX Designers). This approach is in line with the theory of the “technology of persuasion” proposed by B.J. Fogg proposed that computers can play a role in behavioral intervention ([Fogg, 2003](#)). Young also argues with the concept of “Hypernudge” that in the era of big data, governance is exercised through the design and subtle architecture of options ([Yeung, 2017](#)). Therefore, Islamic governance must implement the following principles by entering this layer:

A) Algorithm as a “hidden mentor”: Suggestion algorithms play the role of silent mentors. They educate the user’s taste and value system by continuously highlighting specific types of content. This claim is also supported in the philosophy of technology; as Peter Paul Verbeek has shown with the theory of “ethics of things” morality is formed not only in the human subject, but also in

the interaction between humans and technology, and the designers of technological artifacts have direct moral responsibility (Verbeek, 2011). Therefore, in the Islamic model, algorithms should not be assumed to be “neutral”; rather, they should be coded based on “Value-Sensitive Design” (VSD) (Friedman et al., 2002). Scholars such as Raquib (2022) and Bakar et al. (2025) explicitly propose an 'Islamic virtue-based ethics' for AI, arguing that algorithms should be trained to recognize and promote virtues defined by Islamic ontology.

Operational suggestion: The algorithm should be architected in such a way that “good data” (scientific, ethical, and family-oriented content) gains a higher virality coefficient, while “bad” content (rumors, slander, pornography) is marginalized. This does not mean eliminating the freedom of choice but rather facilitating human growth in this space.

B) Changing key performance indicators: The driving force of current platforms (such as Instagram or YouTube) is the “Engagement Time” indicator. This indicator encourages the platform to display any content that attracts the user the most (even angry or anxiety-inducing content). In the educational governance model, the platform’s success indicators must be redefined. Instead of the “user addiction rate,” indicators such as “user growth,” “psychological peace,” and “real utility” should be the basis for rewarding content producers and algorithms. The Islamic state can, through regulatory tools and financial incentives, require platforms to comply with these ethical standards at the technical level.

C) Cost and benefit in economics Note: In the educational approach, the system should be designed in such a way that access to sin and vice is “costly” both in terms of time and technology, and access to virtue is “cheap and fast.” Accordingly, the path should not be paved for the penetration and domination of false content in the future. Intelligent filtering is only a negative layer of this strategy; its positive layer, “Algorithmic facilitation” is for easy and attractive access to the content of the right.

4.4. Feasibility and implementation challenges

Although coherent in theory, the realization of the “virtue architecture” model faces technical and legal challenges in implementation. Critics may argue that the exercise of national sovereignty is impossible because of the global nature of the Internet and the monopoly of large foreign platforms. The feasibility of this model can be explained in three layers.

A) The layer of domestic platforms: On domestic platforms, the government has full discretion to apply “value-sensitive design” (VSD) and change algorithms in favor of premium content. This requires the development of an “algorithmic justice annex” for platform licensing.

B) Regulatory layer of external platforms: Global experiences such as the European GDPR law or China's cybersecurity laws show that even against tech giants, it is possible to enforce local laws through financial fines and the obligation to comply with ethical protocols, such as intelligent filtering of violence and pornography.

C) Technological layer (artificial intelligence): Recent advances in artificial intelligence have enabled intelligent monitoring and the separation of growth-promoting content from harmful content with high accuracy and in real time, which has greatly reduced the cost of monitoring.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Theoretical Summary: The Paradigm of Transition from “Security Control” to “Educational Guidance”

To explain the cyberspace governance model based on the political-educational philosophy of Islam, this study first examined the nature of this phenomenon. The research findings show that reducing cyberspace to a “tool” in the instrumentalist perspective or an “evil fate” in the essentialist perspective prevents a correct understanding of the requirements of governance in this space. By adopting a “contextualist” approach, it was proven that the nature of digital technology is subject to the “governing atmosphere” surrounding it. Accordingly, the central implication of this article is that digital governance in Islam is not a mere security project but rather an educational megaproject. In this regard, the present study, by presenting a three-layer model including ontological foundations, political principles, and technical mechanisms, showed how the Islamic state can move away from the passive position of “market regulator” and, by seizing the “field,” prepare the ecosystem for a healthy life.

5.2. “Educational Governance”: The Third Way Against the Duality of Liberalism and Authoritarianism

The final achievement of this study is the formulation of the “Educational Governance” model as a “Third Way” in the political philosophy of cyberspace, which defines itself in opposition to two common global models:

A) Against “Digital Liberalism”: With the slogan of “value neutrality” and “free flow of information,” this model practically cedes space to the profit-seeking logic of capitalist platforms [Zuboff \(2019\)](#) and the colonialism of the “data” ([Couldry & Mejias, 2019](#)). Criticizing this liberation, educational governance considers government intervention to “ensure cognitive justice” and “lay the groundwork for collective self-fulfillment” as the inherent duty of the government.

B) Against “digital authoritarianism”: This model relies solely on “censorship,” “blocking,” and “police control” ([Polyakova & Meserole, 2019](#)). Although educational governance emphasizes the need to prevent corruption, it considers its main strategy to be “virtue architecture,” rather than negative and exclusionary measures.

In the proposed model, the government, using “benevolent engineering of the context” and tools such as “virtue-based algorithms” and “choice architecture,” changes the “reward structure” of the platform instead of depriving freedom, so that the “cost of choosing evil” increases and the “choice of good” is facilitated.

5.3. Perspective: Cyberspace, the driver of the “new Islamic civilization”

Finally, it should be noted that in the thought of the Imams of the Islamic Revolution, the ultimate horizon of governance is the realization of the “new Islamic civilization.” Cyberspace, with its inherent characteristics such as “transboundary” and “the possibility of face-to-face communication with the public opinion of the world,” is an irreplaceable platform for issuing the innate message of the Islamic Revolution. If educational governance can be realized in this space

and the atmosphere prevailing in cyberspace is changed from “the 'Wilayah of Taghut' (Tyranny) to the 'Wilayah of Allah'” (Divine Guardianship), this space will transform from a threat to religious identity into the main driver of the formation of a unified nation and readiness for the universal acceptance of truth. Achieving this requires moving from the level of “reactive policymaking” to the level of “active architecture” and the entry of committed elites into.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study. The presented analyses are based on theoretical and library studies, and all cited sources are listed in the references.

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