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Control Theory in the Age of Generative AI: The Case of Stack Overflow

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Developmental paper

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the influence of Generative AI (GAI) on control modes, styles and purpose within open-knowledge networks, using Stack Overflow as a case study. Traditionally, control mechanisms on Stack Overflow are largely informal and rely on a merit-based reputation system that incentivizes high-quality contributions from a community of over 23 million developers. However, the introduction of GAI disrupts these established control dynamics, challenging the integrity of knowledge validation processes and altering accountability structures. Analysis reveals that GAI's influence shifts the network from structured controls to a discourse-driven environment – which is not a static state. Insights on the role of GAI in these changes suggest that control structures, particularly driven by merit-based activities, are greatly under pressure as the human mimicking nature of this technology introduces various challenges.

Keywords: Control Theory, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Open-Knowledge Networks, Discourse-driven control

1. Introduction

Open-source has become increasingly popular, and with the rise of Generative AI (GAI), its impact on these environments is yet to be fully understood. Open-knowledge networks are collaborative platforms where users freely contribute, share, and refine information across various topics, fostering accessible and community-driven knowledge exchange (Sumanth & K, 2018). These networks introduce challenges and complexities in managing user contributions, quality control, and platform integrity in the age of GAI (Burtch et al., 2024). The human-mimicking nature of GAI brings new challenges to control settings. Merit and expertise are under threat as it is becoming more difficult to differentiate between experts and non-experts, especially in the realm of IS. Controls that rely on recognition of expertise and peer-regulation for maintaining platform integrity are battling to account for this phenomenon.

A well-known open-knowledge network at the forefront of this disruption is Stack Overflow, a collaborative question-and-answer platform with over 23 million contributors. Designed as an open-knowledge, coding platform, Stack Overflow is sustained by the contributions of developers and operates on a reputation-based system that incentivizes participation and

attracts skilled users. However, with the advent of GAI, this platform is experiencing a profound shift, grappling with unforeseen challenges to its traditional meritocratic system of user-generated content and peer regulation (Jin et al., 2015; Vranić et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021). With the introduction of GAI, several users have improved their scores and achieved high-reputation rankings. However, this does not necessarily reflect their expertise in their domain (Wang et al., 2021), raising questions about the relevance of merit-based incentives and the culture of community-driven moderation.

Despite the growing popularity of GAI, current control theories largely overlook its role in environments that rely on merit-imposed control mechanisms. Research has yet to fully explore how control modes (Choudhury & Sabherwal, 2003; Kirsch, 1996; Ouchi, 1979), styles (Adler & Borys, 1996; Heumann et al., 2015; Wiener et al., 2016) and purpose (Dekker, 2004; Gulati & Singh, 1998; Wiener et al., 2019) are or can be adapted when AI-generated contributions become indistinguishable from human input. It also remains unclear whether GAI should be treated merely as a tool or something with more control enabling characteristics.

This study aims to address these gaps by analysing Stack Overflow as a case study to reveal how GAI disrupts traditional control concepts in open-knowledge environments and to determine the emergent role of GAI in influencing and shaping platform control dynamics (Gleasure et al., 2019; Wiener et al., 2016). These control concepts will be used to examine how the current structures of control in Stack Overflow holds up against the disruption of GAI, by analysing how it changes as the events in the case progresses.”. These events on Stack Overflow, instigated by GAI, paint a clear picture of its transformative nature. Through this exploration, the study seeks to provide insights looking into three major catalytic events in the case – the ban of GAI, the moderator strike and Stack Overflow’s partnership with OpenAI. Through this process, the paper aims to address the de- or re-configuration of control purpose, modes and style, driven by the human-mimicking nature of GAI.

Research Questions (RQ):

RQ1: How does control modes, styles and purpose manifest in open-knowledge networks in its indented control state?

RQ2: How has the introduction of GAI influenced control modes, styles and purpose in open-knowledge networks.

This paper begins with a background section describing Stack Overflow’s open-knowledge environment, current research on GAI in these spaces, and foundational control theory concepts. The methodology section outlines the case study approach, data collection, and analysis. In the findings, we explore the static control structure in Stack Overflow pre-GAI, the shifts in control modes, styles and purpose post-GAI introduction, and investigate GAI’s role in control settings. The paper concludes with theoretical contributions, practical implications, and suggestions for future research.

2. Background

2.1. Stack Overflow as Open-Knowledge Network

Stack Overflow, part of the broader Stack Exchange network, is the largest open-knowledge platform for developers, at its peak hosting more than 24 million questions and 35 million answers. Among the 173 Stack Exchange communities, it stands out as a vast, community-driven database of programming knowledge, focusing on technical, rather than opinion-based, content. (Movshovitz-Attias et al., 2013; Sumanth & K, 2018).

To maintain content quality, Stack Overflow uses a reputation system—a merit-driven engagement model that rewards users for activities like asking relevant questions, providing accurate answers, and evaluating content through upvotes, downvotes, flagging, and commenting. High-reputation users gain influence and privileges, such as editing posts and enforcing guidelines. Some contributors even become moderators, ensuring adherence to the platform’s rules and maintaining content standards (Sumanth & K, 2018). This reputation system enables employers to evaluate user profiles for expertise (Wang et al., 2021).

To encourage engagement, Stack Overflow employs various gamification and social engagement features. Studies show that these mechanisms significantly boost activity on the platform (Cavusoglu et al., 2015; Jin et al., 2015). However, this activity heavily relies on trust in the integrity and merit of the reputation system (Gallivan, 2001; Vranić et al., 2023).

By choosing Stack Overflow as a case study, the aim is to expand on the context of control in IS with more focus on the environment where stakeholders work independently on various different projects—motivated by the reputation system. Unlike the focus of current IS control literature (Gleasure et al., 2019; Remus & Wiener, 2012; Wiener et al., 2016), that refer to the IS project, rather than the IS platform, as further discussed in the control section.

2.2 Control in Open-Source Networks

Studies on control in IS typically focus on Information System Projects (ISP), where clear objectives, formal roles, and measurable tasks are present (Kirsch, 1996, 2004). *Control amount*, influenced by task complexity, project size, and formalization, explains the *control dynamics* (Kirsch & Cummings, 1996; Remus & Wiener, 2012). A foundational framework for digital control identifies two dimensions: *control configuration*, which refers to formal mechanisms like policies and rules, and *control enactment*, which is the actual governance of these mechanisms (Wiener et al., 2016). Expanding this framework, *control purpose* (Wiener et al., 2016, 2019) shifts the focus from merely enforcing behaviour to aligning decentralized actors towards shared goals, with *value appropriation* ensuring alignment with organizational objectives and *value creation* fostering collaboration (Wiener et al., 2016, 2019). Traditional control systems assume actors are trustworthy and pro-organizational (Davis et al., 1997; Gallivan, 2001; Vranić et al., 2023), aiming to mitigate agency concerns by emphasizing the ‘big picture’ (Heumann et al., 2015; Wiener et al., 2016).

Control mode (Choudhury & Sabherwal, 2003) distinguish *formal control* (input, behaviour, and output) from *informal control* (clan and self-control). This framework guides the paper’s analysis of control mechanisms in Stack Overflow, exploring both formal and informal controls in IS development (O’dwyer et al., 2010). *Control style* can be *coercive* (enforcing strict rules) or *enabling* (supporting user initiative and growth), with the latter fostering collaboration (Adler & Borys, 1996; Heumann et al., 2015; Wiener et al., 2016). In crowdsourced environments, control shifts from formal mechanisms to informal, *discourse-driven* practices, where contributors shape outcomes through influence rather than direct intervention (Gleasure et al., 2019).

Technology-mediated control (TMC) complements collaboration in control settings, coordinating peer interactions without direct oversight (Cram & Wiener, 2020; Howison & Crowston, 2014). In these environments, control emerges through iterative knowledge-sharing processes, with control renegotiated as participants engage asynchronously, emphasizing collective contributions rather than top-down authority (Gallivan, 2001; Jarvenpaa & Majchrzak, 2011).

Concept	Sub concept	Definition	Reference
Control purpose (why)	Value appropriation	Controls for monitoring behaviour to protect resources and maintain standards by reducing misuse.	(Dekker, 2004; Gulati & Singh, 1998; Wiener et al., 2019)
	Value creation	Controls for promoting collaboration and contribution in order to enhance their application of knowledge and skills.	
Control modes (what)	Formal input, behaviour, and outcome control	Rules or guidelines directly governing resource allocation or processes. Awards or sanction users.	(Choudhury & Sabherwal, 2003; Kirsch, 1996; Ouchi, 1979)
	Informal clan and self-control	Norms or social rules encouraging adherence to standards or self-regulation	
Control style (how)	Coercive (or authoritative)	Controls that enforce compliance through strict rules.	(Adler & Borys, 1996; Heumann et al., 2015; Wiener et al., 2016)
	Enabling	Controls that facilitate compliance by enabling users to meet expectations and gain expertise.	
Technology-Mediated Control (TMC)		Using automated systems to enforce, monitor, and support control mechanisms.	(Cram & Wiener, 2020)

Table 1: Adapted from key concepts of control (Cram & Wiener, 2020)

2.3 Generative AI in Open-Knowledge Networks

The integration of GAI is disrupting traditional user participation and content creation patterns, with a decline in activity among newer users, suggesting a disconnect between GAI-driven efficiencies and community-building efforts (Brühl, 2023; Vranić et al., 2023). While GAI offers significant potential for improving decision-making and knowledge sharing (Prasad Agrawal, 2024), it complicates governance, as platforms must balance human and AI-generated contributions, considering technological, organizational, and social forces (Cram & Wiener, 2020; Khaw et al., 2023; Burtch et al., 2024). This dynamic requires a reevaluation of control systems to maintain quality and consistency.

3. Research Method

This study adopts a case study methodology (Yin, 2003) to explore control in Stack Overflow, offering insights into a real-life, contemporary phenomenon. This approach enables an in-depth examination of new phenomena, especially when empirical substantiation is limited (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), and is valuable for observing changes over time. The study progresses through three phases: *Phase 1* gathers data, selects cases, and reviews literature; *Phase 2* analyses content and trace data to apply control theories and frame Stack Overflow as a control case; *Phase 3* uses surveys and interviews to explore GAI's impact on control dynamics in open-knowledge networks (ongoing). A multi-method strategy is used for data triangulation purposes which include incorporating content analysis of Stack Overflow comments, trace data analysis to track shifts in user activity patterns, observations and analysis of news from Meta Stack Exchange and ongoing interviews and surveys with users.

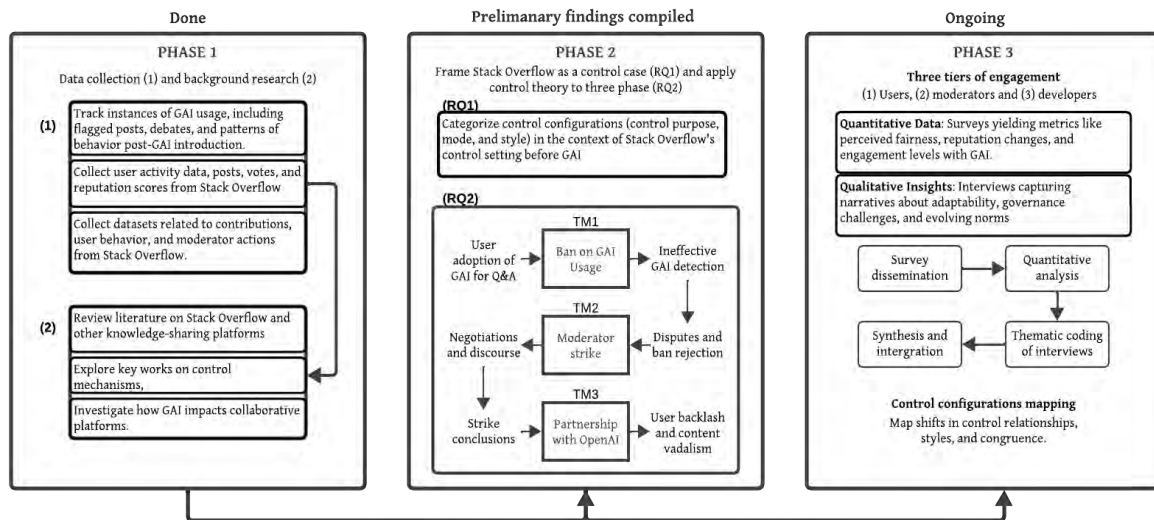


Figure 1. Research plan in three phases

The phased analysis, guided by process theory methodology (Burton-Jones et al., 2015), facilitates a structured examination of control adaptations across three pivotal events, referred to as ‘catalytic events’ which mark significant shifts in Stack Overflow’s control structure. These events, treated as temporal markers, include: (TM1) the ban on GAI usage, (TM2) the moderator strike, and (TM3) the partnership with OpenAI. As illustrated in Figure 1 (Phase 2), these temporal markers delineate distinct moments in the platform’s evolution, enabling the systematic exploration of changes in control mechanisms as the platform navigates technological advancements and community challenges. This research is currently in Phase 2, while preparations are being made to start with Phase 3 (Figure 1).

4. Preliminary Findings

4.1 Framing Stack Overflow as a control case

By categorizing control purpose, modes, and style, we can understand how Stack Overflow’s reputation system restricts unwanted behaviour while encouraging self- and peer regulation to maintain quality, and adapt to community needs.

4.1.1 Control purpose, mode and style pre-GAI

Understanding how Stack Overflow through the lens of control theory has integrated systems of controls, in order to govern its community, is important in contrasting how these structures failed after the introduction of GAI. Controls are centralized around the reputation system – that mediates control purpose and modes, combining coercive moderation and enabling incentives to maintain platform integrity. These controls manifests and changes throughout the case. The table below shows how the controls look like in its static, intended state.

Concept	Sub concept	Application
Control purpose	Value appropriation	Reputation-based privileges ensure only experienced users can perform certain actions, protecting platform standards and resources (‘Example of some privileges’ in Figure 2).
	Value creation	Rewarding insightful answers enhances collective knowledge and individual users’ status, fostering high-quality contributions—without a pro-organization agenda (‘Upvotes/downvotes’ and ‘Platform impact’ in Figure 2).

Control modes	Formal	<i>Behaviour control:</i> Guidelines and moderation direct users to follow standards. ('Review queues' and 'Question flags' in Figure 2).
		<i>Output control:</i> Contributions are evaluated via upvotes, downvotes, and acceptance rates. ('Upvotes/downvotes' in Figure 2).
	Informal	<i>Self-control:</i> Users self-regulate to gain or maintain status and privileges ('Example of content revision' in Figure 2)
		<i>Clan control:</i> Community norms collaboratively uphold content quality
Control style	Coercive	Moderators enforce rules by deleting low-quality content and restricting accounts to maintain standards ('User suspension' and 'Post editing' in Figure 2)
	Enabling	The reputation system motivates users through rewards like badges, points, and privileges.

Table 2. Stack Overflow's pre-GAI control environment

4.1.2 Control mediator: The reputation system

The reputation system mediates control by implicitly defining user behaviour expectations. Quality standards are reinforced through continuous feedback from upvotes, downvotes, and flags, aligning user actions with platform norms. Positive contributions earn rewards like points and privileges, while poor content results in penalties. Each contribution is collectively assessed, creating a self-sustaining ecosystem of governance and quality assurance (Figure 2).

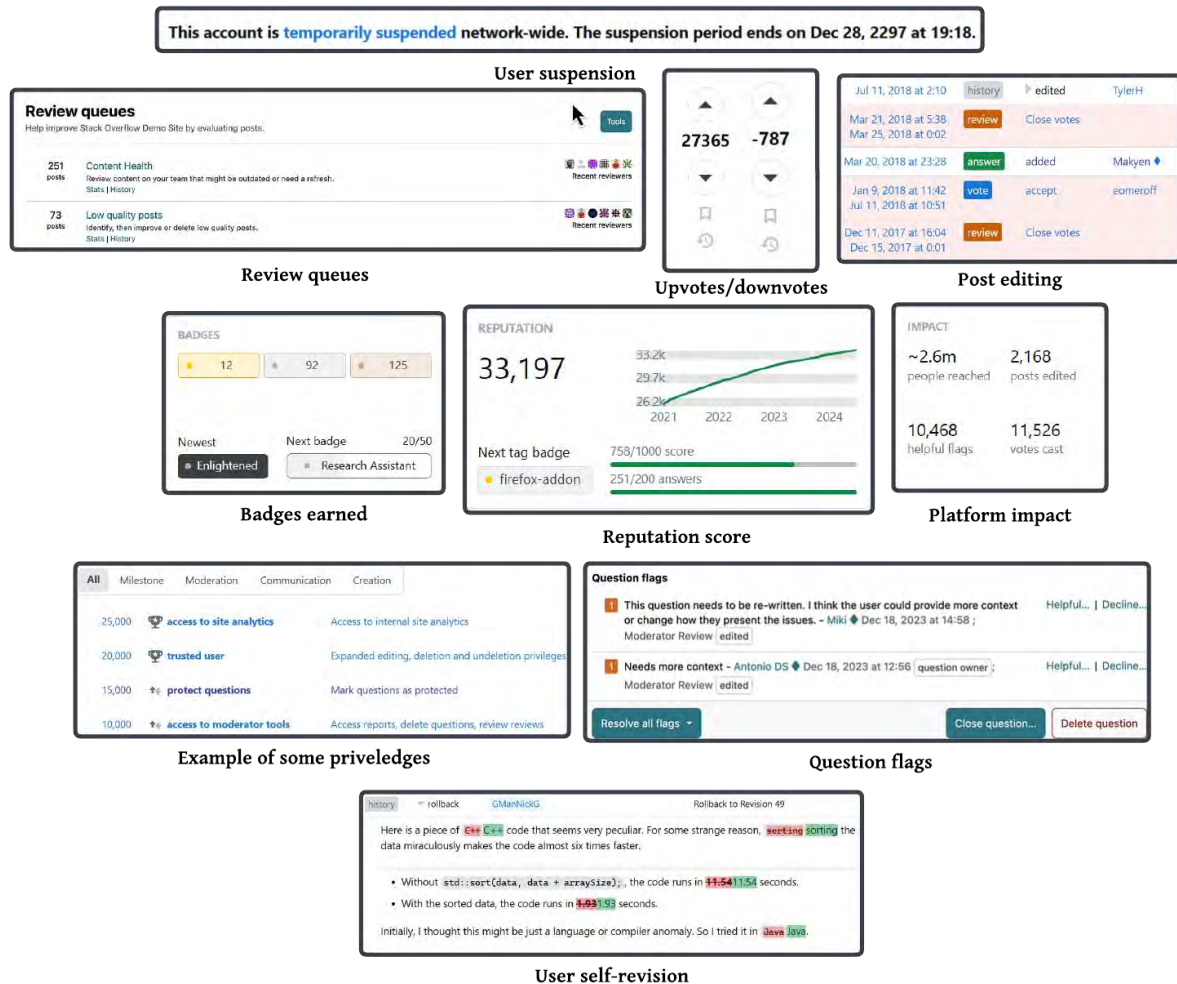


Figure 2: TMC/Reputation system

4.2 GAI's influence on control in Stack Overflow

The static state of Stack Overflow as seen in the previous section, was disrupted by the introduction of GAI. This section investigates how control changed in accordance to this disruption. Figure 3 below shows the phases that the study follows, highlighting the most important catalytic events, what triggered them and what the consequences was. By applying the lens of control theory, we are able to show the de-configuration of control modes, styles and purpose and the attempts to re-configuring it, showing the contrast between the intended state of control (in section 4.1) and how it looked after the GAI-disruption.



Figure 3: Ban on GAI (TM1), Moderator Strike (TM2) and Partnership with OpenAI (TM3) causes and effects

4.2.1 TM1: Ban on GAI usage

The first phase (TM1) marked the introduction of a GAI ban to counter “rep farming,” where users exploited AI to gain reputation points. This overwhelmed moderators and exposed failures in self, behaviour, and output control. The platform shifted from enabling to coercive control to maintain content quality, but the ban sparked debate within the community. Divided into pro- and anti-GAI factions, users demonstrated a loss of clan cohesion as norms fragmented around tags like “AI-generated-content”. During this phase we can see users starting to use GAI to appear as experts, through manipulating the systems of control that are supposed to ensure quality human contribution.

Concept	Description
Purpose	<i>Value Appropriation:</i> GAI-fuelled “rep farming” disrupted content quality, prompting a ban to regain control. <i>Value Creation:</i> AI-generated content provided little to no value, undermining knowledge quality.
Modes	<i>Behaviour:</i> Enforced GAI ban and user suspensions attempted to realign behaviour with quality standards. <i>Output:</i> Introduced new policies for GAI usage to maintain quality but faced enforcement challenges. <i>Self-Control:</i> Eroded as users exploited the system for reputation gains, weakening autonomous adherence to norms. <i>Clan:</i> Divisions between pro- and anti-GAI users created dissonance in community norms.
Styles	Shifts between <i>enabling</i> (e.g., flagging GAI content) and <i>coercive</i> (e.g., banning GAI and suspending users), with coercive control becoming dominant.

Table 3. How GAI changed control after the ban

4.2.2 TM2: The Moderator Strike

During the moderator strike (TM2), control weakened significantly as enforcement of the GAI ban shifted to the community. Reliance on AI detection exposed limitations in behaviour and output control, while staff intervention to reverse the ban led to widespread backlash. The strike disrupted value creation and appropriation, with content quality declining and norms

fragmenting between pro- and anti-GAI factions. Conflict between moderators and staff members became more prevalent, with conflicting views on GAI – moderators wanting it banned, and staff members wanting it integrated. With the absence of coercive control enforced by moderators, the usage of GAI flooded the platform, with moderation backlogs stacking unmanageably high.

Concept	Description
Purpose	<i>Value Appropriation:</i> The strike halted moderation, enabling unchecked ‘rep farming’ and reducing content quality. <i>Value Creation:</i> Declined due to unregulated posts, fuelling concerns of platform decline.
Modes	<i>Behaviour:</i> GAI ban enforcement failed due to weak detection, leading to moderation strike and community frustration. <i>Output:</i> Reliance on the reputation system proved ineffective in curbing low-quality posts during the strike. <i>Self-Control:</i> Sentiment divides weakened user-driven adherence to standards. <i>Clan:</i> Community split into pro- and anti-GAI factions, disrupting shared norms and cohesion.
Styles	<i>Enabling:</i> Reverting the GAI ban attempted to restore enabling control but failed without adequate moderation. <i>Coercive:</i> Administrative intervention and ban retraction led to backlash and the strike.

Table 4. Moderator strike’s effect on control in Stack Overflow

4.2.3 TM3: Partnership with OpenAI

TM3, Stack Overflow’s partnership with OpenAI, marked the peak of control disruption. This partnership meant that OpenAI would have full access to the content on Stack Overflow to train their AI models, while Stack Overflow can deploy an AI assistant on the platform called OverflowAI. Users felt their contributions were appropriated for external gains without recognition or compensation, sparking backlash and eroding platform trust. Value creation declined as users defaced or deleted content, undermining the knowledge base. At this point, little to no form of the static state of control still existed, with the distrust in the platform at its peak. Controlling the crowd was almost impossible, and users left the platform, attempting to remove their contributions. As seen in Table 5 and Figure 3, almost no form of control existed in this phase.

Concept	Description
Purpose	<i>Value Appropriation:</i> User contributions repurposed for OpenAI’s training of ChatGPT without recognition, sparking backlash. <i>Value Creation:</i> Defaced and deleted content undermined the platform’s knowledge base.
Modes	<i>Behaviour:</i> Guidelines lost influence as users defied rules, and moderators struggled to enforce policies. <i>Output:</i> OverflowAI shifted focus from community knowledge to serving OpenAI, eroding content standards. <i>Self-Control:</i> Declined as users protested governance through non-compliance. <i>Clan:</i> Community norms fractured; users felt alienated by the OpenAI partnership.
Styles	<i>Enabling:</i> Reputation-based incentives lost effectiveness as platform goals diverged from community values. <i>Coercive:</i> OverflowAI launch disregarded user concerns, provoking defiance through content removal and account deletion.

Table 5. Control after OpenAI partnership announcement

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The goal of this study is to contribute to the understanding of how GAI disrupts controls in open-knowledge networks by mimicking human behaviour. It highlights GAI's challenge to the foundational human-centric mechanisms of platforms like Stack Overflow—peer governance, reputation, and trust—by enabling users to bypass these structures with AI-generated content. With these preliminary findings we are able to pinpoint critical issues of authorship forgery and misplaced credibility introduced by this technology. Control settings, within crowd-driven environments, need to rethink how effective their controls structures are. This applies across domains, as a new trend of non-experts using GAI to manipulate merit-based systems as seen in this case, are becoming more frequent. Research needs to further explore how to account for these issues. This research also emphasizes the need to expand control theory to account for human-like entities influencing human-driven systems and underscores the importance of adapting moderation practices and governance frameworks to maintain user trust and content standards in the face of AI-induced disruptions.

RQ3: What control relationship, style and congruence manifests through GAI usage?

Regarding our next steps apart from refining RQ1 and RQ2 with conducting interviews and surveys, our goal is to focus on RQ3. In more detail, our research will delve deeper into the dynamic of disruptive human-like technology, exploring how GAI functions within control relationships. Does it act as a stakeholder, a tool, or something entirely new? By examining its congruence with existing control systems and its role in shaping governance, our research aims to contribute to the understanding of control theory in the age of GAI.

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