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ELECTRONIC NEOFEUDALISM: PRO AND CONTRA

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The rapid expansion of digital technologies and platform-based economies has fundamentally transformed the distribution of power, ownership, and social relations, giving rise to new forms of dependency that challenge the principles of the welfare state and democratic governance. Against this background, the concept of **electronic neofeudalism** has emerged as an analytical framework for explaining the concentration of digital power in the hands of large technology corporations and the resulting transformation of social, economic, and political structures. This article aims to examine the theoretical foundations, conceptual characteristics, and critical interpretations of electronic neofeudalism while assessing its relevance as a framework for understanding contemporary digital society. The study employs an interdisciplinary research design with a predominant sociological perspective. The methodological approach combines qualitative content analysis of leading theoretical contributions on surveillance capitalism, platform capitalism, network society, and digital governance with bibliometric analysis of publications indexed in the SCOPUS database. In addition, a conceptual modeling approach is used to identify the principal indicators of electronic neofeudalism and to compare competing theoretical interpretations of the phenomenon. The findings demonstrate that electronic neofeudalism is characterized by the concentration of digital infrastructure and data ownership, algorithmic governance, increasing dependence on digital platforms, growing social inequality, weakened state sovereignty, and the emergence of new hierarchical forms of digital stratification. At the same time, the analysis reveals significant theoretical controversies surrounding the concept. Critics argue that the notion of neofeudalism relies on historically overstretched analogies, lacks clear operational indicators, and risks replacing analyses of contemporary capitalism with metaphorical interpretations. Nevertheless, the concept remains valuable as a critical framework for understanding the structural consequences of platform capitalism, surveillance, and digital dependency. Bibliometric evidence further indicates that scholarly interest in neofeudalism has increased substantially in recent years, reflecting the growing importance of digital transformation within contemporary social science research. The study concludes that a strong democratic welfare state plays a crucial role in limiting digital dependency through antitrust regulation, protection of digital rights, algorithmic transparency, labor protection, and investment in public digital infrastructure. Electronic neofeudalism should therefore be understood not as a replacement for capitalism but as a complementary critical perspective that highlights emerging forms of digital power, inequality, and institutional transformation. The article contributes to the ongoing theoretical debate by synthesizing existing approaches, proposing conceptual indicators for future empirical research, and identifying directions for further refinement of the electronic neofeudalism framework.

Keywords: electronic neofeudalism, platform capitalism, digital inequality, surveillance capitalism, algorithmic control, social stratification, digital dependency.

Elektroniskais neofeodālisms: par un pret

Digitālo tehnoloģiju un platformu ekonomikas straujā attīstība ir būtiski pārveidojusi varas, īpašumtiesību un sociālo attiecību sadalījumu, radot jaunas atkarības formas, kas izaicina labklājības valsts un demokrātiskas pārvaldības principus. Šajā kontekstā **elektroniskā neofeodālisma** jēdziens ir kļuvis par nozīmīgu analītisku ietvaru, kas skaidro digitālās varas koncentrēšanos lielo tehnoloģiju korporāciju rokās un no tās izrietošās sociālo, ekonomisko un politisko struktūru pārmaiņas. Raksta mērķis ir analizēt elektroniskā neofeodālisma teorētiskos pamatus, konceptuālās iezīmes un kritiskās interpretācijas, kā arī izvērtēt šī jēdziena piemērotību mūsdienu digitālās sabiedrības procesu skaidrošanai. Pētījumā izmantota starpdisciplināra pieeja ar dominējošu socioloģisko perspektīvu. Metodoloģiskais ietvars apvieno kvalitatīvu saturu analīzi par nozīmīgākajām teorijām, kas saistītas ar uzraudzības kapitālismu, platformu kapitālismu, tīklu sabiedrību un digitālo pārvaldību, bibliometrisko analīzi, izmantojot SCOPUS datubāzes publikācijas, kā arī konceptuālo modelēšanu, lai identificētu elektroniskā neofeodālisma galvenos indikatorus un salīdzinātu konkurējošās teorētiskās interpretācijas. Pētījuma rezultāti liecina, ka elektronisko neofeodālismu raksturo digitālās infrastruktūras un datu īpašumtiesību koncentrācija, algoritmiskā pārvaldība, pieaugoša atkarība no digitālajām platformām, sociālās nevienlīdzības padziļināšanās, valsts suverenitātes vājināšanās un jaunu digitālās stratifikācijas hierarhiju veidošanās. Vienlaikus analīze atklāj būtiskas teorētiskas diskusijas par šī jēdziena lietojumu. Kritiķi norāda, ka neofeodālisma koncepcija balstās uz vēsturiski pārspīlētām analogijām, tai trūkst skaidri operacionalizējamo indikatoru un pastāv risks aizstāt mūsdienu kapitālisma analīzi ar metaforisku interpretāciju. Tomēr šis jēdziens saglabā nozīmīgu analītisko vērtību kā kritisks ietvars platformu kapitālisma, digitālās uzraudzības un digitālās atkarības strukturālo seku izpratnei. Bibliometriskā analīze apliecina, ka pēdējos gados zinātniskā interese par neofeodālismu ir ievērojami pieaugusi, kas atspoguļo digitālās transformācijas pieaugošo nozīmi sociālo zinātņu pētījumos. Rakstā secināts, ka spēcīgai demokrātiskai labklājības valstij

ir būtiska nozīme digitālās atkarības mazināšanā, īstenojot konkurences regulējumu, aizsargājot digitālās tiesības, nodrošinot algoritmu caurskatāmību, stiprinot darba tiesību aizsardzību un investējot publiskajā digitālajā infrastruktūrā. Tādējādi elektroniskais neofeodālisms būtu jāuztver nevis kā kapitālisma aizstājējs, bet gan kā papildinošs kritisks skatījums, kas izgaismo jaunās digitālās varas, nevienlīdzības un institucionālās transformācijas formas. Raksts sniedz ieguldījumu teorētiskajās diskusijās, sintezējot esošās pieejas, piedāvājot konceptuālus indikatorus turpmākajiem empīriskajiem pētījumiem un iezīmējot elektroniskā neofeodālisma koncepta turpmākās pilnveides virzienus.

Atslēgvārdi: elektroniskais neofeodālisms, platformu kapitālisms, digitālā nevienlīdzība, uzraudzības kapitālisms, algoritmiskā kontrole, sociālā stratifikācija, digitālā atkarība.

Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, the model of the welfare state based on a social economy emerged as a response to the challenges of industrial capitalism, widespread inequality, and social insecurity. It was characterized by active state involvement in the redistribution of resources, the provision of basic social guarantees, and the maintenance of principles of social justice. However, in the context of rapid digitalization and globalization, the long-term viability of this model in its traditional form is increasingly being called into question.

Contemporary transformations affect not only the economy but also the social fabric of society. The structure of employment is changing, the boundaries between labor and leisure are becoming blurred, and digital platforms are increasingly mediating fundamental social processes – from employment and access to information to education and even healthcare. Against this backdrop, the concept of electronic (or digital) neofeudalism has gained traction in academic and public discourse. This term refers to new forms of dependence, hierarchy, and inequality that emerge from the fusion of digital technologies with social governance and market logic.

Electronic neofeudalism describes a situation in which digital platforms and tech corporations assume roles once reserved for state institutions: they control access to resources, set the rules of interaction, collect and process personal data, and influence the behavior and life trajectories of individuals. At the same time, these platforms often operate beyond the legal frameworks of nation-states and lack mechanisms of democratic accountability. This structure resembles feudal relationships of dependence, where power and resources are concentrated in the hands of a limited number of digital “lords”, while users become “vassals” deprived of formal rights and protections.

In this context, the sociological perspective is particularly valuable. It enables an analysis not only of institutional changes but also of everyday practices, subjective experiences, patterns of social mobility, and mechanisms of reproducing inequality. Sociology also offers analytical tools for examining power, status, control, and interaction – tools that are essential for understanding the new realities of digital society.

Literature review

Over the past decades, various theorists and researchers have discussed phenomena associated with digital neofeudalism. Shoshana Zuboff is among the most influential figures in this debate. In her work, Zuboff argues that technology companies seek not only to use users’ personal data for marketing purposes but also to create a new form of power - one that manipulates consumer behavior and exacerbates social inequality. She introduces the concept of “surveillance capitalism,” in which digital platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon exploit user data to construct mechanisms of behavioral control and power.

These platforms collect information about user behavior and use it to shape their desires and preferences, resulting in a new kind of social dependency that closely resembles feudal relations. In this arrangement, users do not own their data, while corporations exercise control over their decisions

and actions. Zuboff focuses particularly on psychological and behavioral manipulation through data and algorithms. She conceptualizes platforms as the new “lords,” and users as “vassals” whose lives are governed by digital systems (Zuboff 2019).

In *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (2019), Jodi Dean focuses on the political consequences of platform capitalism. She explores the concept of the “comrade” in the context of political and social belonging. Dean discusses the ideas of solidarity, common purpose, and collective identity - historically associated with communist and socialist movements - but argues that these ideas hold broader significance in contemporary political contexts.

The book centers on how individuals can find their place within a political community, how political identity is formed, and how collective belonging can counteract loneliness and political isolation in the postmodern era. Dean also addresses critical issues related to democracy, political participation, and the transformation of political movements in the context of globalization and technological change (Dean 2019, 2025)

Jamie Susskind, in his books *Future Politics: Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech* (2018) and *The Digital Republic: On Freedom and Democracy in the 21st Century* (2022), discusses the role of large corporations and tech giants in shaping the future of society – a role increasingly linked to the idea of electronic neofeudalism, where corporate structures displace traditional forms of political authority. In Susskind’s view, neofeudalism can be seen as a socio-economic model in which traditional patterns of feudal dependence – such as control over land and the subordination of populations – are preserved or reconfigured through modern technologies and new forms of social organization. Susskind analyzes how neofeudalism manifests in contemporary societies, particularly in relation to globalization, growing social inequality, and the transformation of state sovereignty. His work frequently addresses issues such as information control, technological monopolies, and the redistribution of resources (Susskind 2018, 2022).

In *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), Manuel Castells investigates the impact of network technologies on society. He introduces the concept of the *network society*, in which communication and information technologies play a central role in economic, cultural, and political life. Although Castells does not use the term “neofeudalism”, his description of digital networked societies resonates with the concept, as he views information technologies as new sources of global control and inequality. Castells emphasizes the global scale of these network structures, which infiltrate all aspects of life. In his analysis, platforms create new forms of global social stratification, which may be interpreted as a variant of digital neofeudalism (Castells 1996).

The topic of electronic or digital neofeudalism has gained increasing relevance today, especially given the expanding influence of major digital corporations with vast technological resources and data. As states lose control over digital processes and corporations become de facto new “sovereigns”, this situation begins to resemble a feudal order – one in which power and control are concentrated in the hands of a few, while the majority of the population becomes increasingly dependent on them.

Table 1

Common and distinctive features of the approaches

Theorist	Main emphasis	Approach features
Shoshana Zuboff	Surveillance capitalism: data manipulation and behavioral control	Focus on behavioral manipulation, digital governance, and user commodification
Jodi Dean	Neofeudalism: digital dependence, loss of political subjectivity	Emphasis on platform populism and loss of civic agency
Manuel Castells	Network capitalism: global information networks	Focus on global scale, impact of information technologies

Source: elaborated by the authors based on the literature review.

A comparison of different approaches to the phenomenon of electronic feudalism reveals no fundamental contradictions among the analyzed authors, though it does highlight differences in emphasis and methodological orientation. For instance, Shoshana Zuboff places primary emphasis on psychological control and behavioral manipulation through digital platforms. In contrast, Benjamin Schwarz and Jodi Dean focus on the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of large technology corporations.

Manuel Castells, in his analysis of network capitalism, offers a more global perspective, viewing digital platforms as integral components of transnational power structures. Meanwhile, Zuboff and Schwarz concentrate on the localized yet powerful influence of corporations within individual nation-states.

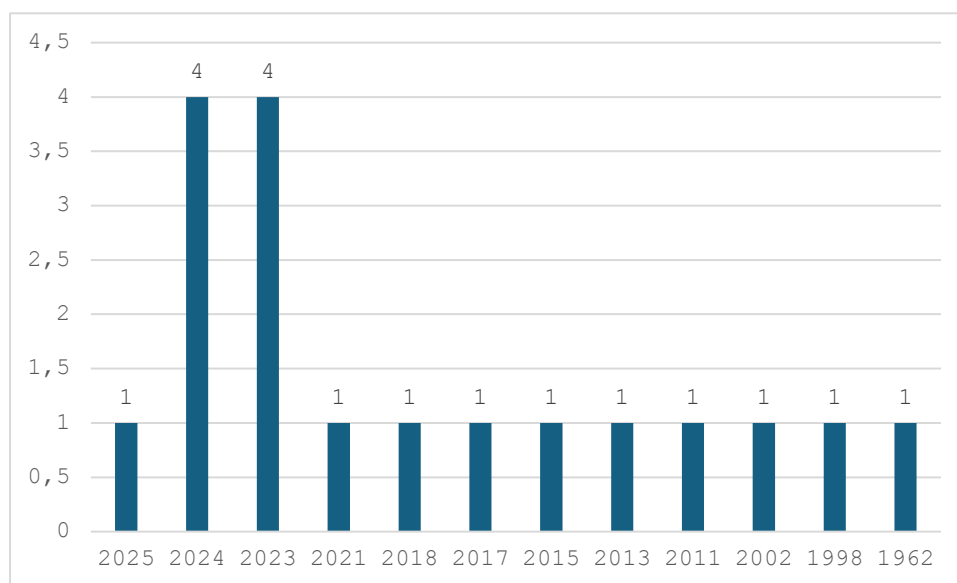
Jodi Dean identifies the loss of political autonomy and the manipulation of collective decision-making as central features of electronic feudalism. Schwarz, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of economic structures, market monopolies, and unequal access to digital resources.

Thus, while the approaches to electronic feudalism substantially overlap, they differ in focus, analytical perspective, and conceptual frameworks. Each theorist contributes a distinct interpretation that enriches our understanding of the ongoing transformations in socio-economic and political domains.

We analyze the reflection of the “neofeudalism” in the authoritative SCOPUS database.

Figure 1

**Documents by the year, which contain the word “neofeudalism”
in the title, abstract, or keywords within the SCOPUS database, 1962–2025**

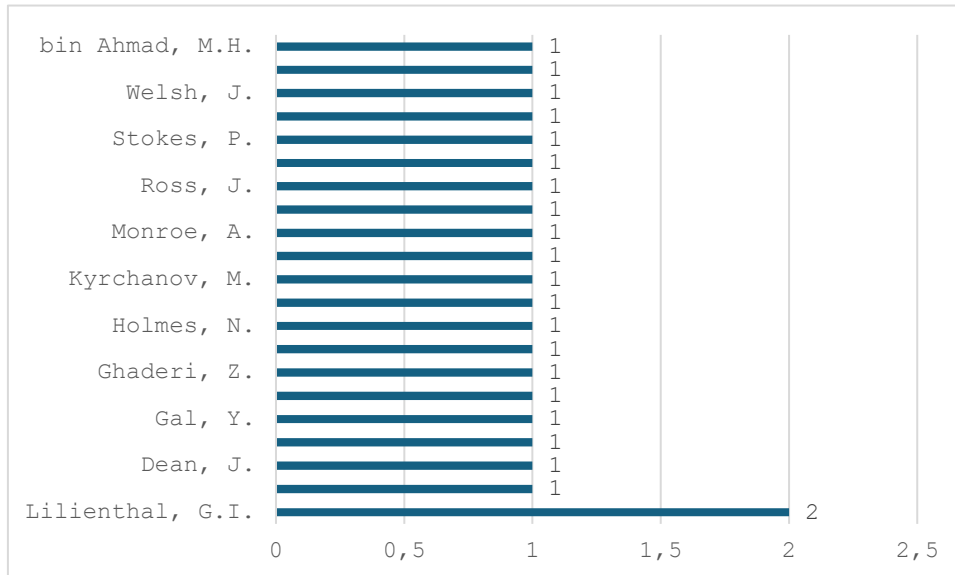


Source: elaborated by the authors based on the SCOPUS database.

The topic of “electronic neofeudalism” has received significant attention in the academic community during 2023–2024, which may be linked to the intensification of digital transformation, platform control, and the discussion of new forms of digital dependency in society.

Figure 2

**Documents by the author, which contain the word “neofeudalism”
in the title, abstract, or keywords within the SCOPUS database, 1962–2025**

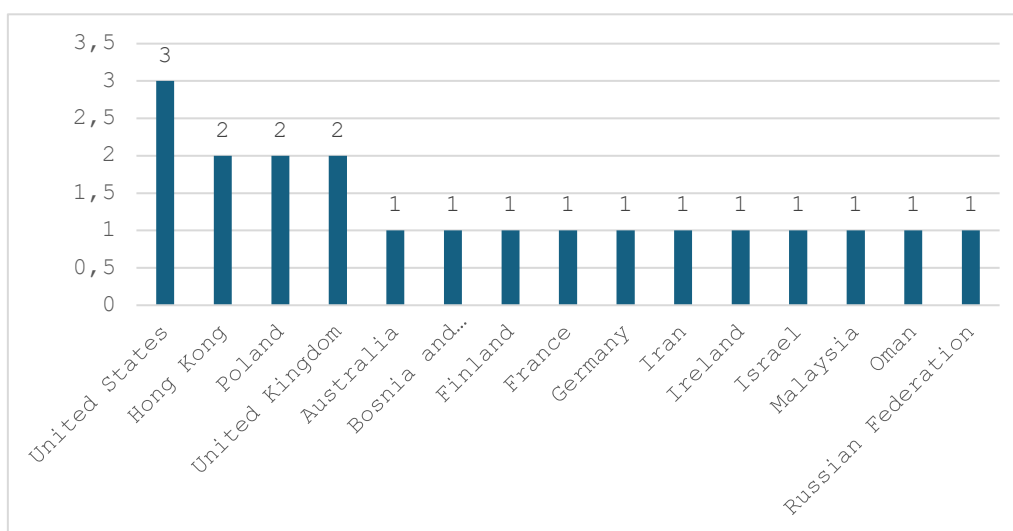


Source: elaborated by the authors based on the SCOPUS database.

Research on the topic of “electronic neoliberalism” is conducted by various scholars; however, their work is generally limited to a single publication. Only one author (G. Lilienthal) has contributed more than once, which may indicate a particular interest in this field.

Figure 3

**Documents by country, which contain the word “neofeudalism”
in the title, abstract or keywords within the SCOPUS database**

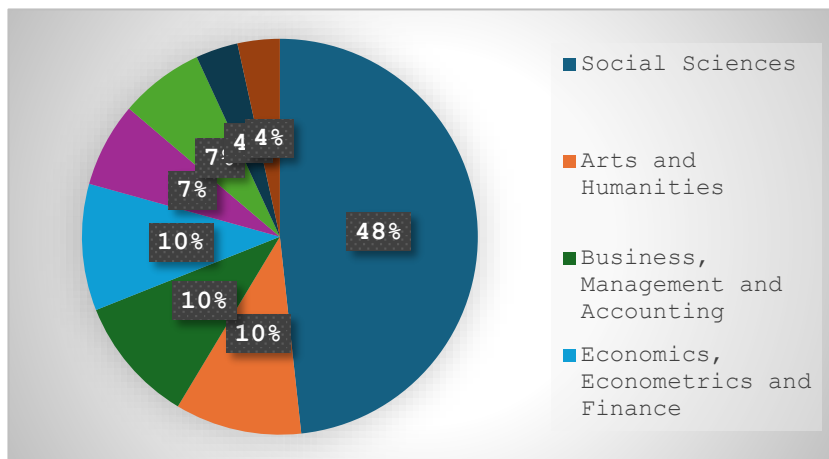


Source: elaborated by the authors based on the SCOPUS database.

Research on the topic of electronic neofeudalism spans a wide geographic range, covering countries in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas. The highest concentration of activity is observed in English-speaking countries, especially the United States. This may indicate that the topic is most relevant to societies with a high level of digitalization and a well-developed platform economy.

Figure 4

**Documents by research field, which contain the word “neofeudalism”
 in the title, abstract or keywords within the SCOPUS database**



Source: elaborated by the authors based on the SCOPUS database.

The social sciences dominate by a wide margin, with 14 publications, which is unsurprising given that electronic neofeudalism touches upon issues of power, digital inequality, rights, and freedoms in society. Humanities, business, and economics each account for 3 publications, reflecting interest in the topic from the perspectives of values, governance, and market transformations. Computer science and psychology are represented by two publications each, indicating the technical and behavioral aspects of the phenomenon under study. Other fields - agricultural sciences and engineering - have one publication each, suggesting a relatively weak interdisciplinarity, although some connections are still evident.

According to the SCOPUS database, the two most frequently cited academic articles are:

- (1) Daniel's and Greenwood's *Neofeudalism: The Surprising Foundations of Corporate Constitutional Rights* (2017). This article provides an in-depth legal-historical study in which the author reveals the paradoxical foundations of corporate constitutional rights, tracing their origins back to feudal institutions. The authors argue that modern corporations possess a form of “private sovereignty” akin to the position of feudal lords in the past (Daniel, Greenwood 2017). The article is notable for its strong interdisciplinary foundation (law, history, political science), its critical approach to American judicial practice and corporate personhood, and its demonstration of how legal mechanisms enhance corporate autonomy while undermining democratic principles. Its high citation count is explained by the topicality of corporate power and digital control.
- (2) Ferry's *Forms of Irresponsibility* (1962). In this early and conceptually rich article, the author analyzes institutional forms of irresponsibility in society, focusing on the alienation of power and decision-making beyond citizens' control. Despite the publication's age, the work remains relevant to neofeudalism as it describes long-term mechanisms of power concentration and the weakening of democratic participation (Ferry 1962). The article is characterized by its early

attempt at a systemic analysis of social responsibility in institutions of power; its applicability to both public and private (corporate) actors; and its frequent use as a theoretical foundation in more recent research on digital control, platform capitalism, and managerial elites. It possesses significant conceptual depth and universality, making it widely cited across disciplines.

Both articles are key sources in shaping the intellectual field around the concept of electronic neofeudalism. Greenwood offers a contemporary legal-institutional analysis of corporate power, while Ferry lays the groundwork for critiquing irresponsible power as early as the mid-20th century. Their high citation rates stem from their engagement with fundamental aspects of power, ownership, and public control – topics that are especially relevant in the context of digital transformation.

Research methodology

The study is based on an interdisciplinary approach with a predominant sociological perspective. The methodological framework incorporates elements of critical theory, social stratification theory, platform capitalism, as well as concepts of digital control and surveillance. This approach enables the analysis of electronic neofeudalism as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon situated at the intersection of technology, power, and social structure.

The methods used in the study can be divided into three groups:

- (1) Qualitative content analysis. A detailed analysis of theoretical works was conducted, including those by authors such as Shoshana Zuboff, Jodi Dean, Manuel Castells, Jamie Susskind, and others. A comparative analysis of their approaches allowed for the identification of common features and differences in interpreting the phenomenon of electronic neofeudalism, which was summarized in a table in the literature review section.
- (2) Bibliometric analysis. Using the SCOPUS database, trends in the citation of the term "neofeudalism" in academic publications were analyzed. Charts were created by year, author, country, and scientific discipline. This made it possible to reflect the dynamics of academic interest in the topic and assess the interdisciplinarity of the field.
- (3) Social-theoretical modeling. Indicators of electronic neofeudalism were formulated, including parameters such as digital dependency, algorithmic control, inequality in access to platforms, the level of digital rights protection, among others. These indicators are conceptual in nature and serve as a basis for further empirical research.

The study is primarily theoretical and analytical in orientation but includes elements of empirical analysis (based on bibliometric data), which ensures a balanced approach between theory and observable social phenomena.

Results of the study

Electronic neofeudalism: essence and critique. Electronic neofeudalism is a socio-economic system in which power, resources, and control over digital infrastructure are concentrated in the hands of a limited number of large technology corporations, while the broad masses of users, workers, and small entrepreneurs find themselves in a dependent position, deprived of full autonomy and property rights over their data and digital activities.

Key characteristics of electronic feudalism include: (1) centralization of digital power, where a few tech giants (such as Google, Amazon, Meta, Apple, Microsoft) control critical digital infrastructure, platforms, and services. These corporations create a closed ecosystem where users can only act according to imposed conditions; (2) ownership and control of data, where personal user data is treated as a resource owned by the platforms. Users do not own their data, do not control its usage, and receive no compensation for its commercial exploitation; (3) algorithmic governance, where the

behavior of users, workers, and customers is managed through algorithms and artificial intelligence. Decisions regarding access to information, work, income, and even social status are made opaquely and automatically; (4) digital dependency (vassalage) – users and digital workers (e.g., gig economy participants) depend on platforms with no alternatives. This dependency takes the form of “rental relations”: a person gains access to a service but controls nothing. Lack of property rights in digital space – users do not own the content, tools, or environment in which they operate; everything belongs to the platform. Even digital assets (such as accounts, algorithms, platform-based businesses) can be deleted or restricted without explanation; (5) reinforcement of social inequality – the gap grows between digital “elites” (owners and operators of platforms) and the rest of society. Technological progress intensifies class polarization and weakens traditional state and labor institutions; (6) weakening of the state’s role – corporations become more powerful than many nation-states. They interfere in politics, lobby legislation, and sometimes act as “supra-national actors”.

To facilitate the conceptual operationalization of electronic neofeudalism, the principal socio-economic dimensions identified in the literature can be systematized into a coherent analytical framework. These dimensions reflect the structural transformations associated with platform capitalism, algorithmic governance, and the growing concentration of digital power. Rather than representing isolated phenomena, they illustrate interconnected processes through which digital technologies reshape labor markets, economic opportunities, social mobility, and political participation. Accordingly, Table 2 summarizes the main dimensions of electronic neofeudalism together with their corresponding socio-economic indicators that may serve as a basis for future empirical measurement and comparative analysis.

Table 2

Socio-economic indicators of electronic neofeudalism

Dimension	Description	Socio-economic indicators
Monopolization of digital platforms	Concentration of digital infrastructure, data, and services in the hands of a small number of technology corporations, creating closed digital ecosystems.	• Market share of leading technology companies • Number of competitors in key digital markets • Market capitalization of dominant platform corporations
Dependence on platforms and algorithms	Growing reliance of users and workers on digital platforms for employment, communication, and access to economic resources, with behavior increasingly governed by algorithms.	• Algorithmic ranking and recommendation systems • User rating and reputation systems • Behavioral profiling and personalized algorithmic management
Digital inequality	Unequal access to digital technologies, data, education, and opportunities, resulting in new forms of economic and social exclusion.	• Internet accessibility and digital divide • Digital skills and access to online education • Income disparities between IT professionals and other workers • Differences in social protection between platform and traditional workers
Expansion of platform-based employment	Increasing prevalence of gig work and freelance employment accompanied by declining labor protections and employment stability.	• Share of gig and freelance workers • Share of permanent employment • Pension, health insurance, maternity and other social protection coverage
Reduced social mobility	Access to employment, education, and economic opportunities increasingly depends on participation in specific	• Availability of employment and education through digital platforms • Degree of exclusion from digital ecosystems

	digital ecosystems and possession of digital resources.	• Access to modern technologies and high-speed internet
Platform populism and opinion manipulation	Digital platforms shape public opinion while creating an illusion of political participation while maintaining centralized control over information flows.	• Misinformation and algorithmically amplified content • User engagement mechanisms (likes, recommendations, personalized feeds) • Concentration of decision-making power within platform corporations

Source: elaborated by the authors based on the theoretical analysis of electronic neofeudalism.

The proposed system of indicators demonstrates that electronic neofeudalism extends beyond technological innovation and represents a multidimensional transformation of contemporary socio-economic relations. The identified indicators capture changes in market concentration, labor organization, social inequality, digital dependency, and political influence, thereby providing a comprehensive framework for examining the societal consequences of platform-based digital economies. Although the indicators remain primarily conceptual, they establish a foundation for developing measurable variables that can be employed in empirical studies of digital transformation, platform governance, and emerging forms of social stratification. Future research may refine these indicators by integrating statistical datasets, digital governance indices, labor market statistics, and measures of digital inclusion to evaluate the extent to which electronic neofeudalism manifests across different countries and institutional contexts.

Digital caste system. A new form of caste emerges in the digital economy, dividing people into digital elites (e.g., developers, tech investors) and users (passive consumers of data and services). *Indicators:* Digital elite - the proportion of highly paid IT specialists and startup founders compared to the majority working on platforms; digital exploitation - gig economy and low-paid jobs, dependence on external platforms for subsistence.

Electronic neofeudalism as a socio-economic phenomenon is expressed in significant resource redistribution, where large technology companies gain advantages in power relations, and users and workers become dependent on these platforms. These indicators demonstrate how capital and power concentrate in the hands of tech giants, and how changes in the workforce, resource accessibility, and social mobility lead to new forms of dependency.

Limitations of the concept and alternative views. Criticism of the term and concept of “electronic neofeudalism” comes from various theoretical and methodological perspectives. Although the concept has gained some traction, especially in popular discourse and critical theory, many researchers – particularly sociologists and economists – point to its insufficient scientific rigor, historical overstretch, and theoretical limitations. The main arguments of critics and their significance are as follows: Modern digital relations, even if they create new forms of dependency, are qualitatively different from the feudal model, where the key element was direct personal dependency based on land, vassal-lord relationships, and legal rights. The term “feudalism” has a clear historical meaning tied to the pre-industrial period. Its metaphorical use can be misleading as it obscures the economic and legal specifics of modern forms of digital dependency (e.g., these are regulated by contracts, licenses, user agreements rather than by status and loyalty); The concept of neofeudalism allegedly dilutes the critical understanding of capitalist relations by shifting attention to the image of feudal domination, distracting from analyses of class, market, and global processes that remain essentially capitalist. This complicates mobilization against platform exploitation within existing anti-capitalist or social-democratic frameworks. The real mechanisms of exploitation- market, profit, labor - remain capitalist, not feudal, in their nature and logic; The notion of “electronic neofeudalism” is difficult to operationalize: it is hard to clearly specify what exactly distinguishes it from “digital capitalism”, “platform economy”, “surveillance capitalism”, etc. The concept does not provide a clear typology or a set of indicators by

which the transition to electronic neofeudalism could be measured or identified; The use of the term is often associated with moralistic rhetoric or anti-elitist positions rather than precise scientific analysis. It is frequently used in popular discourse or activist circles rather than academic research. The concept may lose analytical neutrality, becoming a tool of critical rhetoric rather than rigorous sociological analysis.

Sociologists generally fall into three groups regarding the concept of electronic neofeudalism:

- (1) Critically distanced – sociologists like Wolfgang Streeck or American sociologist Erik Olin Wright are skeptical of attempts to feudalize modernity, considering capitalism still the main structure of contemporary social hierarchy. They emphasize that new forms of exploitation are developments within capitalism rather than a transformation into neofeudalism.
- (2) Integrative interpreters – some authors, including Nick Srnicek (in the context of platform capitalism) and Shoshana Zuboff (within surveillance capitalism), use analogies to feudalism metaphorically but maintain a connection to capitalist structures. They acknowledge that platform dependency and digital hierarchy resemble feudal forms but are still governed by market logic and profit.
- (3) Sociologists inclined toward conceptual rehabilitation of the term – some critical sociologists (e.g., Jodi Dean) use the term neofeudalism provocatively and politically, highlighting the degradation of political representation, the collapse of the public sphere, and digital control. They see electronic neofeudalism less as an economic model and more as a socio-political phenomenon characterized by the dismantling of modernity's institutions, primarily democracy and citizenship (Srnicek 2017; Streeck 2017; Wright 1997).

The concept of electronic neofeudalism is interesting as a critical-theoretical tool that helps describe new forms of digital dependency, algorithmic control, and social stratification. However, it faces justified criticism for historical overstretch, theoretical vagueness, insufficient operationalization, and substituting capitalism analysis. Sociologists mostly either regard the concept critically or use it in a limited, metaphorical sense to emphasize the social hierarchy of the digital age rather than as an exact model of social organization.

The phenomenon of artificial sociality occupies an important but rather specific place in the debates on electronic neofeudalism. Artificial sociality (or artificially created social structures in the digital environment) is usually associated with the development of artificial intelligence, platform ecosystems, and algorithmic systems that can reproduce or even replace traditional social interactions, creating new forms of dependence and control. However, the concept of “artificial sociality” itself is not often used in the same terms as, for example, “neofeudalism” or “platform capitalism”, and rarely appears in the main debates on electronic neofeudalism.

This may be explained by several factors:

- (1) Conceptual vagueness – technologists and social philosophers, when discussing digital transformations, often prefer more precise terms such as “platform capitalism”, “surveillance capitalism”, or “digital neofeudalism” to describe specific mechanisms through which technologies impact social and economic structures. The notion of “artificial sociality” tends to refer to a broader and more abstract phenomenon that is difficult to directly link to concrete social processes or technological structures.
- (2) Lack of a universal theory – unlike the concepts of “platform capitalism” or “digital neofeudalism”, which are fairly well theorized, artificial sociality as a phenomenon lacks a clear and recognized theoretical model. It may include phenomena such as digital social networks, algorithmic and virtual communities, and interactions between humans and AI. These phenomena are usually treated as separate aspects rather than as a unified phenomenon of “artificial sociality”.

- (3) Focus on social dependence – key authors working on concepts of electronic neofeudalism or digital capitalism concentrate more on people's dependence on digital platforms and data than on sociality per se. This is because control over data and management of user behavior primarily reflect structures of power and monopoly, rather than “social ties” in the conventional sense.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of artificial sociality can be considered through the lens of artificial intelligence and platform ecosystems: Shoshana Zuboff (with her concept of surveillance capitalism) touches on the interplay between technological platforms and users, where the creation and management of social relations through data and algorithms turns users into “subjects of surveillance” and “passive participants” in the ecosystem. However, she does not specifically use the term “artificial sociality”, although her work describes the creation of a new social order where digital technologies set the fundamental conditions. Manuel Castells, discussing network capitalism, points to the change in social structure caused by the widespread spread of internet platforms. This can also be seen as the creation of new social ties and dependencies but again without using the term “artificial sociality”. Castells focuses more on social and economic networks without labeling it artificial sociality. Jodi Dean, in the context of neofeudalism, discusses the loss of political autonomy and public participation through digital platforms, where manipulation of social networks leads to an illusion of democracy. Yet she does not use the term “artificial sociality”.

The problem of artificial sociality remains fairly theoretical and is not always seen as a key indicator of social change. Much attention is paid to changes in economy and power rather than social structure as such. Thus, the phenomenon of artificial sociality is indeed related to the concept of electronic neofeudalism but is currently used more as a latent, auxiliary concept rather than a central one. Authors working with this notion (such as Zuboff, Castells) discuss the interrelation of digital technologies and social structures but do not introduce the term “artificial sociality” because it remains too abstract for clearer theoretical constructions. For deeper understanding, it is important to develop theories that could unite the new social structures created by platforms and AI with more traditional sociological concepts of social relations and dependencies. The limited use of the term “artificial sociality” in the debates about electronic neofeudalism can also be explained by the fact that sociologists are generally not central among the authors actively discussing this topic. Several important reasons explain this. For example, many authors examining the digital economy, platform structures, and algorithmic governance (such as Shoshana Zuboff, Manuel Castells) focus more on economic and technological aspects than on social ones. They concentrate on power, monopoly, data, and control, which is certainly important for understanding changes in social structure but does not directly address the notion of social dependence in the context of artificially created social ties. This also relates to neofeudalism as a concept emphasizing platform corporations and economic power. In this logic, the main focus is on markets, platforms, and monopolies, rather than on human relations, which is important for sociologists but less relevant for theorists working on economics and technology. Sociologists, for whom the category of “sociality” is central, tend not to participate actively in debates on digital forms of capitalism and neofeudalism. Theorists working in economic sociology or platform economy usually attribute digital technology-driven changes to new forms of dependency or class hierarchies but do not use the notion of “artificial sociality” itself. Furthermore, many of these debates are mainly conducted by professional economists, philosophers, or media culture theorists, who tend to view digital platforms, algorithms, and artificial intelligence as means altering economic relations and power rather than social relations in their classical sociological sense. As a result, social structures are often perceived through economic and technological lenses, which naturally affects the perception and use of concepts like artificial sociality.

Authors discussing digital neofeudalism are usually more interested in topics such as behavioral control, algorithmic manipulation, platform economy, and data collection, leading to a strong focus on

informational power and economic dependence, but not fully addressing the “social nature” of these changes. For sociologists, the question of how these changes affect social interactions, class relations, and senses of community remains sidelined.

At the same time, sociologists generally focus on human interactions and collective structures, perceiving digital capitalism as a tool that only changes the form of social life but does not challenge its essence. This results in preferring narrower terms like “platform sociality” or “platform relations” instead of “artificial sociality”, limiting discussion to economic and technological aspects.

Sociologists discussing class changes tend to focus on the digital divide, inequality, and societal stratification by digital criteria rather than the creation of “artificial” social structures. They view changes as a redistribution of power, not as the formation of new social ties, which distorts the discussion of digital technologies’ impact on “sociality”.

While AI technologies and platforms influence social relations, many sociologists are beginning to consider the opportunities and risks for social structures in the context of these changes. The question of how new forms of social ties affect feelings of belonging or technological dependence remains open. This leaves room for theoretical research that might propose a deeper understanding of “artificial sociality” as a key phenomenon of electronic neofeudalism. Future sociological work may attempt to develop clearer theories linking social dependencies and technological platforms within a unified theoretical model.

As can be seen, the phenomenon of artificial sociality may not find wide application in discussions of electronic neofeudalism because these debates are often conducted by scholars from economic, technological, and philosophical disciplines that emphasize economic and power aspects rather than sociality as a central category. However, this does not mean that social relations remain outside the scope. On the contrary, there is a significant need for a deeper and more systematic theoretical approach that could integrate the phenomenon of artificial sociality in the context of digital neofeudalism and, more broadly, within the changing structures of digital societies.

The comparison between electronic neofeudalism and historical feudalism is an important step in understanding the essence of modern digital dependency. It not only introduces a vivid metaphor, but also helps determine the extent to which the analogy is justified – where it works and where it distorts reality. Several authors have already conducted in-depth comparative analyses, most notably in the context of social hierarchy, dependency, and control.

In a number of works on platform economy and neofeudalism, feudal relations are compared to the relationships between platforms and their users. These works demonstrate that digital platforms, like feudal lords, control infrastructure (formerly land, now digital infrastructure), and that labor becomes dependent not through formal contracts but via algorithmic mediation and opaque rules.

In her work, McKenzie Wark proposes a radical rethinking of the modern social order, arguing that classical capitalism is dead, replaced by a new form of power – no less and possibly even more totalitarian – based on control over information. She calls this condition “vectoralism”, and its ruling subject the vectoralist class (Wark 2004).

Jodi Dean, in her book *Capital's Grave: Neofeudalism and the New Class Struggle* (2025), compares the loss of civil rights and democratic participation to the loss of public life during the transition from antiquity to feudalism. She draws parallels between: vassal loyalty and subscription / participation in digital communities; the fragmentation of power in feudalism and the digital sovereignties of platforms.

The conceptual comparison between vectoralism and electronic neofeudalism allows the analysis to move beyond a general metaphor of digital dependency and to identify more precisely how power is organized in contemporary digital capitalism. Wark’s concept of vectoralism emphasizes control over information, digital platforms, and data flows, while electronic neofeudalism focuses on the control of “digital land”, access to infrastructure, and platform-based dependency. These two approaches are not contradictory; rather, they highlight different dimensions of the same broader transformation in which digital corporations accumulate

power by controlling the conditions of access, visibility, labor, and participation in the digital environment. Therefore, Table 3 compares the main features of vectoralism and electronic neofeudalism in order to clarify their analytical similarities and differences.

Table 3

Comparison of digital power models: vectoralism and electronic neofeudalism

Feature	Vectoralism	Electronic neofeudalism
Type of power	Control of information and digital platforms	Control of “digital land”, access to infrastructure
Exploitation	Extraction of rent from data and attention	Rent for access, digital serfdom
Power subject	Digital corporations, platforms	Analogue of feudal lords
Dependents	Hackers, users	“Digital vassals” and users

Source: elaborated by the authors based on Wark 2004; Dean 2025.

The comparison proposed by Ursula Huws is based on an analogy between feudal seigneurial dependency and the dependency of gig workers on digital platforms. This is a structural and functional comparison that reveals common features between two historically different, yet socially similar forms of subordination (Huws 2020).

Table 4

Feudalism and gig economy: a structural and functional comparison

Feudalism (Seignorial relations)	Gig economy
The lord controls the land and access to it	The platform controls access to orders, visibility, and ratings
The vassal must remain loyal	The gig worker depends on the platform, forced to follow rules without dialogue
No right to appeal the lord’s decisions	No transparency in algorithms, inability to contest bans or penalties
Dependence on the lord’s “favor”	Dependence on rating systems, reviews, and task availability
Economy of dues and corvée labor	Commissions, platform fees, and algorithmic task distribution

Source: elaborated by the authors based on Huws 2020.

These comparisons help to uncover the mechanisms of digital subordination and hierarchization, while also requiring caution so as not to replace the analysis of complex digital structures with an archaic metaphor.

The role of a strong social state. A strong social state is a key actor capable of regulating the digital economy by protecting citizens from platform-based dependency; ensuring fundamental rights such as access to information, digital literacy, employment, and protection from discrimination; and financing digital infrastructure as a public good rather than a commodity.

The discussion above suggests that electronic neofeudalism is not an inevitable consequence of digitalization but is strongly influenced by institutional arrangements and public policy choices. Different countries and regions have adopted distinct approaches to regulating digital platforms, protecting digital rights, and balancing technological innovation with social welfare. These policy frameworks vary considerably in the degree of state intervention, market regulation, labor protection, and digital sovereignty they promote. Examining these approaches provides valuable insights into how governments can mitigate digital dependency and reduce the concentration of platform power while preserving the benefits of digital transformation. Therefore, Table 5 summarizes the main characteristics of digital policy frameworks adopted in selected countries and regions.

Table 5

Characteristics of digital policy frameworks in selected countries / regions

Country / region	Characteristics
European Union	Leader in creating digital regulations: GDPR, Digital Markets Act, Digital Services Act; strong regulatory framework and user rights protection
France	Strict antitrust measures, promotion of digital taxation, protection of gig economy workers
Germany	Promotes a digital sovereignty project (GAIA-X), supports digital inclusion
China	Strategic state control over platforms, though with an authoritarian bent (examples: limiting gaming time, platform oversight)
Scandinavian countries	Combine social protection with digital inclusiveness: internet access, digital public services, regulation of gig platforms

Source: elaborated by the authors based on the literature review.

Effective resistance to electronic neofeudalism requires: the demonopolization of platforms and limitations on their digital sovereignty; the expansion of citizens' digital rights; institutional protection of labor in the digital environment; investment in alternative platform models – under public, cooperative, or community governance. Without the active involvement of a strong and democratic state, efforts to reduce digital dependency are doomed to remain fragmented. Currently, the European Union demonstrates the most systematic approach.

Table 6

Mechanisms for countering electronic neofeudalism and the role of the welfare state

Domain	Mechanism	Content / goal	Implementation examples
Legal	Antitrust regulation	Limiting the power of dominant digital platforms	EU vs Google and Meta; US vs Amazon and Apple
	Digital user rights	Right to privacy, control over personal data	GDPR (EU), Digital Services Act, California Consumer Privacy Act
	Recognition of digital workers as employees	Protection of gig workers, recognition of labor rights	“Riders’ Law” (Spain); EU Platform Work Directive initiative
	Mandatory algorithm transparency	Disclosure of AI and automation decision logic	AI Act (EU), Digital Markets Act
	Digital tax	Taxation of global platform activities	France, India, Italy: digital tax for Google/Facebook
Economic	Public investment in sovereignty	Creation of independent digital infrastructure	GAIA-X project (EU); China's digital sovereignty strategy
	Support for alternatives (open source, cooperatives)	Development of democratic platforms and services	Mastodon, Diaspora, ProtonMail, Linux
	Basic income / digital dividend	Compensation for the exploitation of digital data	Finland, Kenya (UBI experiments); proposals by Lanier and Varoufakis
Socio-governmental	Role of a strong welfare state	Guaranteeing rights, platform regulation, digital labor protection	EU, Germany, France, Nordic countries – digital inclusion, data protection

	Support for digital citizenship and inclusion	Ensuring equal access to digital resources and rights	Estonia (e-government); Sweden, Norway – digital literacy and access
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Source: elaborated by the authors based on the theoretical analysis of electronic neofeudalism.

A strong welfare state plays a key role in preserving and enhancing the mechanisms of the social economy, limiting digital dependency and hierarchies, shaping the rules of digital justice, protecting vulnerable groups, and developing public alternatives to digital feudalism.

Conclusion

Contemporary digital transformation is accompanied by the emergence of new forms of social dependency and hierarchies, which are increasingly interpreted through the concept of electronic neofeudalism. This term allows for the generalization of processes related to the strengthening power of digital platforms, the loss of user autonomy, the growth of algorithmic control, and the institutional weakening of the state in the digital environment.

The analysis has shown that platform corporations are beginning to perform quasi-governmental functions by regulating access to information, labor, and social benefits, while remaining outside the scope of democratic accountability. In the digital economy, there is an intensification of social stratification, growth of digital inequality, and the formation of a new caste structure, where data and algorithms become tools of dependency.

Despite its explanatory power, the concept of electronic neofeudalism sparks debates within the academic community due to historical analogies, difficulties in operationalization, and the possible substitution of capitalist relations analysis with feudal rhetoric. However, its metaphorical strength helps to reveal key features of the digital era – inequality of access, power over data, erosion of rights, and reduced social mobility.

Particular attention should be paid to the role of a strong and democratic social state capable of forming effective mechanisms for digital regulation, protecting the rights of users and workers, as well as supporting public and cooperative digital initiatives. Without active state intervention, the risks of digital dependency and social marginalization will only intensify.

Thus, electronic neofeudalism should be viewed as a challenge to social justice and democracy in the 21st century, requiring new institutional solutions, theoretical understanding, and practical mechanisms for regulating the digital environment.

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