

From Attention to Attachment: The Three A's Framework for Proactive Governance of Human-AI's Boundaries

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Abstract

The reactive governance of social media—intervening only after polarization, mental health harms, and misinformation became entrenched—offers a cautionary precedent for artificial intelligence. As AI systems evolve from instrumental tools into relational agents, governance challenges shift from managing attention capture to managing attachment formation, a qualitatively distinct phenomenon with potentially irreversible developmental and institutional consequences. This conceptual paper introduces the Three A's Framework (Agency, Augmentation, Automation) as a proactive governance mechanism for establishing human–AI boundaries before harms materialize. Drawing on integrative literature synthesis spanning attention economics, attachment theory, platform governance, and responsible innovation, we theorize the transition from the attention economy to an emerging attachment economy. From this synthesis, we derive five criteria for ex ante boundary determination: consequence severity and irreversibility, risk distribution and capacity to bear harm, accountability and contestability, verifiability and trust calibration, and developmental and relational impact. We advance technology governance theory by conceptualizing the attachment economy as a distinct phase requiring new governance logics, introducing the 3A Framework as a task-level mechanism for proactive AI governance, operationalizing boundary-setting through governance criteria, and generating testable propositions across healthcare, education, and high-performance organizational contexts. By leveraging lessons from the social media era, the framework offers a practical response to the Collingridge dilemma by providing governance leverage while institutional AI deployment remains sufficiently malleable for intervention.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, agency, augmentation, automation, Collingridge dilemma, proactive governance

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