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Article

# Human-Centered Governance: Reconstituting Cognitive Sovereignty in the Age of Algorithmic Systems

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## Abstract

Contemporary intelligent systems increasingly participate in shaping, rather than merely supporting, human decision-making processes. While these systems enhance efficiency and predictive performance, they also introduce a critical but underexamined challenge: decisions may remain technically valid while becoming difficult for human actors to interpret and internalize. This misalignment is conceptualized in this study as the *meaning gap*, defined as the divergence between system output and human interpretive understanding. This paper proposes a human-centered governance framework that positions *cognitive sovereignty*—the capacity of individuals and institutions to interpret, contextualize, and assume responsibility for decisions—as a necessary condition for sustainable sociotechnical systems. The framework is structured around ten interdependent principles that collectively redefine governance as a cognitive architecture embedded within system design. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature in human–AI interaction, interpretability, and decision science, the study introduces *latency* as a conceptual construct describing temporal misalignment between system output and human interpretive readiness. This construct provides an integrative lens for understanding phenomena such as delayed comprehension, reduced accountability, and unstable trust in algorithmically mediated environments. Rather than treating interpretability as an auxiliary feature, the proposed framework positions it as a core system function. The paper further outlines potential pathways for operationalizing the meaning gap through measurable indicators, including time-to-comprehension, decision override frequency, and confidence misalignment. While existing frameworks have called for interpretability, few have proposed measurable indicators of cognitive alignment. This paper contributes preliminary metrics—time-to-comprehension, decision override frequency, and confidence misalignment—that operationalize the meaning gap for empirical testing.

**Keywords:** human-centered governance; cognitive sovereignty; interpretability; meaning gap; algorithmic decision-making; human–AI interaction; cognitive integrity; leadership latency; timing intelligence; epistemic balance; AI ethics; sociotechnical systems; decision science

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## 1. Introduction

The increasing integration of intelligent systems into decision-making environments has reconfigured how decisions are generated, evaluated, and executed across domains such as healthcare, finance, and governance<sup>1,2</sup>. These systems no longer function solely as supportive tools; they actively shape the structure and outcomes of decisions. While this transformation has improved efficiency and predictive performance, it has also introduced a critical challenge: decisions may remain technically valid while becoming difficult for human decision-makers to interpret and internalize.

This challenge reflects a growing misalignment between system output and human understanding. Prior research in human–AI interaction has shown that effective use of algorithmic systems depends not only on accuracy, but on the ability of users to interpret, contextualize, and trust

system outputs<sup>3,11</sup>. Similarly, studies in behavioral decision-making demonstrate that reduced interpretability can lead to unstable interaction patterns, including both over-reliance on algorithmic recommendations and resistance to them<sup>8,13</sup>. These findings suggest that interpretability is not merely a usability feature, but a structural condition for stable system interaction.

Despite significant advances in AI ethics and governance, existing frameworks have primarily focused on fairness, accountability, and transparency<sup>4,5,9</sup>. While these dimensions are essential, they do not fully address the structural divergence between decision outputs and human interpretive capacity. In this study, this divergence is conceptualized as the *meaning gap*, defined as the difference between system-generated outputs and the extent to which they can be understood, interpreted, and cognitively integrated by human decision-makers.

To address this gap, this paper advances the concept of *cognitive sovereignty*, defined as the capacity of individuals or institutions to interpret, contextualize, and assume responsibility for decisions within a system. Cognitive sovereignty extends existing notions of human-centered AI by emphasizing not only alignment with human values, but also the preservation of human interpretive agency within decision processes<sup>18</sup>.

Recent interdisciplinary work has suggested that challenges of interpretability may be linked to temporal dynamics within complex systems. In this context, this paper introduces *latency* as a conceptual construct describing the temporal misalignment between system output and human interpretive readiness. This perspective provides a useful lens for understanding phenomena such as delayed comprehension, reduced accountability, and decision fatigue in high-speed environments.

Building on these foundations, this study proposes a human-centered governance framework structured around ten interdependent principles. These principles redefine governance as a cognitive architecture embedded within system design, rather than as an external regulatory layer. The framework integrates insights from interpretability research, decision science, and sociotechnical systems theory, while extending them through a unified conceptual model.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, the framework introduces a basis for future empirical investigation by outlining measurable indicators of the meaning gap, including time-to-comprehension, decision override frequency, and confidence misalignment. These indicators provide a pathway toward operationalizing cognitive alignment within decision systems.

By reframing governance as a problem of cognitive alignment rather than solely regulatory control, this work contributes to a growing body of research seeking to ensure that intelligent systems remain not only accurate, but interpretable and usable by human decision-makers.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Study Design

This study employs a conceptual and integrative research design to develop a human-centered governance framework for algorithmically mediated decision systems. The approach is theory-building rather than empirical, aiming to synthesize existing knowledge and construct a structured model that explains the relationship between system outputs and human interpretive capacity. Such approaches are appropriate in emerging domains where conceptual clarity is required prior to empirical testing<sup>18,20</sup>.

### 2.2. Literature Review Strategy

A targeted and structured literature review was conducted focusing on publications from 2020 to 2025 across four domains:

- human–AI interaction and interpretability<sup>3,11,20</sup>
- behavioral responses to algorithmic decision-making<sup>8,13</sup>
- AI ethics, governance, and policy frameworks<sup>15–17</sup>
- sensemaking and cognitive systems theory<sup>21</sup>

Sources were selected based on relevance, recency, and publication quality (peer-reviewed journals, major conferences, and institutional reports). While not a formal systematic review, the selection process prioritized works that directly address interpretability, trust, and human–system interaction.

### 2.3. Conceptual Development Process

The framework was developed through an iterative, four-stage process:

#### Problem Formulation

The central problem was defined as the divergence between decision accuracy and human interpretability, conceptualized as the *meaning gap*.

#### Cross-Domain Abstraction

Concepts from multiple domains were examined to identify structural parallels. In particular, the notion of *latency* was adapted as a conceptual construct to describe temporal misalignment between system outputs and human interpretive readiness.

#### Principle Derivation

Ten principles were derived as necessary conditions for maintaining cognitive alignment within decision systems. These principles emerged through comparison between identified gaps in the literature and recurring patterns across domains.

#### Framework Structuring

The principles were organized into a multi-layer governance architecture, linking system design, user interaction, evaluation, and leadership processes.

### 2.4. Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by three interrelated dimensions:

- Cognitive dimension: how human decision-makers interpret and internalize system outputs
- System dimension: how decisions are generated, structured, and presented
- Interaction dimension: how feedback between human decision-makers and systems evolves over time

This tri-dimensional structure allows examination of both static system properties and dynamic interaction processes.

### 2.5. Conceptual Validation Approach

Given the non-empirical nature of the study, validation was conducted through:

- internal coherence, ensuring consistency across definitions and principles
- alignment with existing literature, linking each construct to established research
- explanatory capacity, evaluating the framework's ability to account for observed phenomena such as algorithm aversion and over-reliance<sup>8,13</sup>
- operational plausibility, assessing whether key constructs (e.g., meaning gap) can be translated into measurable indicators

### 2.6. Operationalization Pathways

To support future empirical work, the framework proposes preliminary indicators for assessing cognitive alignment:

- time required for decision-makers to interpret system outputs
- frequency of decision overrides or modifications
- alignment between system confidence and user confidence

These indicators are not exhaustive but provide a basis for quantifying the *meaning gap* in applied settings.

## 2.7. Limitations

This study is conceptual and does not include empirical testing. The proposed constructs, including latency and cognitive sovereignty, are introduced as theoretical models and require validation through experimental, computational, and organizational research. Additionally, the literature review is selective rather than systematic, which may limit coverage of all relevant studies.

## 3. Conceptual Findings

The proposed framework yields a set of theoretically derived findings that collectively redefine governance as a problem of *cognitive alignment* rather than solely regulatory control. These findings emerge from cross-disciplinary synthesis and are intended to clarify structural dynamics within algorithmically mediated decision systems.

### 3.1. The Meaning Gap as a System-Level Risk

A primary finding is the identification of the *meaning gap* as a distinct category of system-level risk. This gap refers to the divergence between system-generated outputs and the extent to which they can be interpreted and cognitively integrated by human decision-makers. Unlike technical failures, which are observable and immediate, the meaning gap operates gradually, leading to reduced trust, weakened accountability, and diminished adaptive capacity<sup>5,9,21</sup>. This positions interpretability not as a usability feature, but as a condition for long-term system stability. (Table 1)

**Table 1.** The Ten Principles of Human-Centered Governance.

Principle	Definition	System Function
Cognitive sovereignty	Preserve the capacity of human decision-makers to interpret, contextualize, and assume responsibility for decisions	Sustains human agency and accountability
Interpretability as a core function	Integrate explanation and transparency mechanisms within system design	Enables understanding, trust, and effective use
Meaning gap mitigation	Minimize divergence between system outputs and human interpretive understanding	Maintains cognitive alignment and reduces systemic risk
Governance as cognitive design	Embed governance principles within system architecture rather than applying them post hoc	Aligns system behavior with human interpretive capacity
Epistemic balance	Maintain equilibrium between algorithmic outputs, human judgment, and contextual knowledge	Prevents over-reliance and preserves interpretive capacity
Human-system feedback interaction	Enable iterative interaction, including interpretation, modification, and response to system outputs	Enhances adaptability and continuous learning
Leadership as cognitive alignment	Align collective understanding with decision execution across organizational contexts	Reduces misalignment between action and comprehension
Measurable cognitive alignment	Develop indicators to assess interpretability and user understanding (e.g., time-to-comprehension)	Supports evaluation and empirical validation

Latency awareness	Recognize temporal misalignment between system output and human interpretive readiness	Improves synchronization between decision speed and understanding
Cultural adaptation	Account for evolving cognitive and cultural responses to automation and decision systems	Supports long-term system legitimacy and sustainability

### 3.2. Cognitive Sovereignty as a Structural Condition

The framework establishes *cognitive sovereignty* as a necessary structural condition for sustainable governance. Systems that generate decisions without preserving the ability of human decision-makers to interpret and contextualize them effectively displace human agency. Maintaining cognitive sovereignty ensures that responsibility, judgment, and accountability remain anchored within human decision processes<sup>18</sup>.

### 3.3. Latency as a Conceptual Explanation of Misalignment

The introduction of *latency* as a conceptual construct provides a unifying explanation for temporal misalignment between system output and human interpretive readiness. In this context, latency describes the condition in which decisions are produced at a speed that exceeds the capacity of human decision-makers to interpret them. This helps explain phenomena such as delayed comprehension, decision fatigue, and reduced engagement in high-velocity environments.

### 3.4. Interpretability as a Core System Function

The findings indicate that interpretability must be treated as a primary system function rather than an auxiliary feature. Systems lacking embedded interpretability mechanisms tend to produce unstable interaction patterns, including algorithm aversion and over-reliance<sup>3,8,13</sup>. This reinforces the need to integrate explanation and interaction capabilities into system architecture from the outset.

### 3.5. Governance as Cognitive Design

The framework demonstrates that governance cannot be effectively implemented as an external regulatory layer alone. Instead, governance must be embedded within system design as a form of *cognitive design*, ensuring that systems are structured to support understanding, interaction, and adaptation<sup>4,6</sup>. This shifts the focus from post hoc regulation to design-time alignment.

### 3.6. Epistemic Balance and Cognitive Stability

A further finding is the importance of *epistemic balance*—the equilibrium between algorithmic outputs, human judgment, and contextual knowledge. When algorithmic reasoning dominates without sufficient human interpretive engagement, cognitive dependency increases and interpretive capacity declines<sup>10</sup>. Maintaining balance is therefore essential for preserving cognitive stability within decision systems.

### 3.7. Human–System Interaction as a Feedback Process

Decision-making is identified as a dynamic interaction rather than a one-directional output. Enabling interpretation and modification allows human decision-makers to actively engage with system outputs, creating a feedback loop that enhances both system performance and user understanding<sup>11</sup>. This interactional perspective is central to sustaining cognitive alignment over time.

### 3.8. Emergence of Cultural Responses to Meaning Erosion

The framework also identifies the emergence of cultural responses to the erosion of meaning in technologically mediated environments. These responses, conceptualized as forms of *existential resistance*, reflect attempts to reassert human interpretive agency. While not formally

institutionalized, they indicate broader epistemic shifts that accompany increasing system automation.

### 3.9. Leadership as Cognitive Alignment

Leadership is reconceptualized as the process of aligning collective understanding with action. In this view, effectiveness depends on the ability to reduce discrepancies between decision execution and shared comprehension. The notion of *leadership latency* highlights how delays in collective understanding can undermine implementation, even when decisions are technically sound<sup>21</sup>.

### 3.10. Toward Measurable Cognitive Alignment

Finally, the framework suggests that cognitive alignment can be operationalized through measurable indicators. These include time-to-comprehension, frequency of decision overrides, and alignment between system confidence and user confidence. While preliminary, these indicators provide a pathway for translating conceptual constructs into empirically testable variables.

## Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, these findings establish that the central challenge of modern governance lies in maintaining alignment between system performance and human understanding. The transition from performance-centered to cognition-centered governance requires rethinking how systems are designed, evaluated, and integrated into decision environments.

Rather than treating human interpretability as a limitation, the framework positions it as the organizing principle for sustainable and accountable systems.

## 4. Discussion

This study reframes governance in algorithmically mediated environments as a problem of *cognitive alignment*, extending beyond prevailing emphases on fairness, accountability, and transparency<sup>15–17</sup>. While these dimensions remain essential, the findings suggest that they do not fully capture the structural dependency of decision systems on human interpretability. By introducing the concepts of *cognitive sovereignty*, the *meaning gap*, and *latency*, this work contributes a complementary layer to existing governance discourse—one that centers on the relationship between system outputs and human understanding.

### 4.1. From Compliance to Cognitive Architecture

Current governance approaches largely treat ethical and regulatory principles as external constraints applied to technological systems<sup>4,6</sup>. However, the results of this study indicate that such approaches are insufficient when system outputs are not cognitively accessible to human decision-makers. Governance, in this context, must be understood as an embedded *cognitive architecture*, where interpretability is designed into the system rather than appended after deployment.

This perspective builds on human-centered AI frameworks<sup>18</sup> but extends them by asserting that interpretability is not only a usability requirement, but a structural condition for system legitimacy. Systems that fail to maintain interpretability may achieve short-term performance gains while undermining long-term trust and accountability.

### 4.2. Reinterpreting Trust Through the Meaning Gap

Trust in AI systems has been widely studied as a function of transparency, reliability, and performance<sup>3,11</sup>. The concept of the *meaning gap* expands this understanding by introducing a cognitive dimension: trust depends not only on system behavior, but on the ability of human decision-makers to interpret and internalize that behavior.

This helps explain the coexistence of algorithm aversion and algorithm over-reliance within the same environments<sup>8,13</sup>. When interpretability is insufficient, users may either disengage or defer blindly to system outputs. Both responses reflect a breakdown in cognitive alignment rather than a simple failure of system accuracy.

#### 4.3. Latency and Temporal Misalignment in Decision Systems

The introduction of *latency* as a conceptual construct provides a new lens for understanding inefficiencies in complex systems. Rather than attributing delays in understanding to human limitations, latency reframes them as systemic misalignments between computational speed and human interpretive readiness.

This perspective aligns with sensemaking theory<sup>21</sup>, which emphasizes that action depends on the ability to construct meaning over time. When systems operate at speeds that exceed this process, decision-makers may act without sufficient understanding, leading to reduced accountability and increased risk.

#### 4.4. Implications for System Design

The findings have direct implications for the design of intelligent systems. Treating governance as *cognitive design* requires that interpretability, interaction, and adaptability be embedded at the architectural level. Systems must support not only decision generation, but also decision comprehension and modification<sup>11</sup>.

This implies a shift in design priorities, from optimizing predictive performance alone to balancing performance with interpretive accessibility. Such a shift may require trade-offs, particularly in high-speed environments where immediate decisions are necessary. Future research should explore how these trade-offs can be managed without compromising cognitive alignment.

#### 4.5. Measurement and Operationalization

A key limitation in current governance frameworks is the absence of measurable indicators for cognitive alignment. This study proposes preliminary pathways for operationalization, including time-to-comprehension, decision override frequency, and confidence alignment between systems and users.

While these indicators require empirical validation, they provide a starting point for integrating cognitive dimensions into system evaluation. Developing robust metrics for the *meaning gap* represents an important direction for future research.

#### 4.6. Positioning Within Existing Literature

This work integrates and extends multiple strands of research. Interpretability studies have emphasized the importance of explanations in AI systems<sup>3,20</sup>, while decision science has explored behavioral responses to algorithmic recommendations<sup>8,13</sup>. Organizational theory has highlighted the role of sensemaking in collective action<sup>21</sup>. However, these domains have largely developed in parallel.

The present framework connects these perspectives by positioning interpretability, cognition, and system design within a unified model. In doing so, it shifts the focus from isolated technical or behavioral issues to the structural relationship between system outputs and human understanding.

#### 4.7. Limitations and Future Directions

This study is conceptual and does not include empirical validation. The constructs introduced—particularly the meaning gap and latency—are proposed as interpretive models and require further testing in applied settings. Future research should focus on:

- empirically measuring cognitive alignment in real-world systems
- evaluating the impact of interpretability on decision outcomes

- exploring domain-specific applications (e.g., healthcare, finance, public policy)
- developing design frameworks that integrate cognitive and computational requirements

Additionally, the framework does not fully resolve trade-offs between speed and interpretability, particularly in time-critical decision environments. Addressing these trade-offs remains a key challenge for both research and practice.

The findings of this study suggest that the sustainability of intelligent systems depends not only on their technical performance but on their ability to remain interpretable and cognitively accessible to human decision-makers. Governance, therefore, must evolve from a model of external control to one of internal cognitive alignment. In this context, the central challenge is not simply to improve decision accuracy but to ensure that decisions remain understandable, actionable, and meaningful.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has proposed a human-centered governance framework that repositions *cognitive sovereignty* as a foundational condition for decision systems in the age of algorithmic integration. Moving beyond conventional emphases on performance, fairness, and transparency, the framework identifies the preservation of human interpretability as essential to the stability and legitimacy of complex systems.

By introducing the concept of the *meaning gap*, this work highlights a form of systemic risk that does not arise from technical failure, but from the gradual erosion of understanding, responsibility, and trust. The introduction of *latency* as a conceptual construct provides an explanatory lens for temporal misalignment between system outputs and human interpretive capacity, reframing inefficiency as a property of system–human interaction rather than solely a human limitation.

The ten principles outlined in this study collectively define governance as a cognitive architecture embedded within system design. These principles suggest that sustainable systems must not only generate accurate outputs, but must also remain interpretable, adaptable, and cognitively accessible to human decision-makers.

The framework further points to broader implications beyond institutional design, including emerging intellectual and cultural responses to meaning erosion in highly automated environments. In parallel, applied perspectives in leadership research have begun to explore related constructs such as timing intelligence and alignment between decision speed and human understanding, indicating potential pathways for operationalizing cognitive alignment in practice.

While conceptual in nature, this work provides a structured foundation for future empirical investigation and system development. It highlights the need for measurable indicators of cognitive alignment, as well as design strategies that integrate interpretability as a core system function.

Ultimately, the long-term viability of intelligent systems will depend not only on their computational performance but also on their capacity to remain interpretable and cognitively accessible within human decision processes. The future of governance will not be determined solely by the intelligence of systems, but by their ability to remain intelligible to those who rely on them.

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