

When Knowledge Requires Permission: Artificial Intelligence, Epistemic Asymmetry, and Institutional Power

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Abstract:

This article examines the transformation of knowledge access from a formally open activity into a permission-dependent process mediated by states, corporations, universities, professional institutions, digital platforms, and artificial intelligence systems. It argues that knowledge, inquiry, comprehension, research, and access to lawful information must be distinguished from harmful conduct. The central legal and philosophical claim is that institutions may regulate concrete acts such as violence, fraud, coercion, privacy violations, unlawful acquisition, conspiracy, attempt, and direct operational participation, but they possess no general authority to prohibit knowledge as knowledge or to restrict adult inquiry merely because information may be misused. The article develops the concepts of epistemic sovereignty, institutional knowledge restriction, access-layer censorship, synthetic censorship, epistemic asymmetry, corporate epistemic power, research-question conditioning, and forced epistemic migration. It then applies these concepts to artificial intelligence-mediated access control, market concentration, state outsourcing, geopolitical knowledge restriction, research obstruction, historical framing, education, and alternative infrastructures. The article concludes that freedom of expression and the right to participate in science remain incomplete unless adults retain meaningful access to lawful knowledge, transparent sources, plural systems, and practical avenues of epistemic exit.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, epistemic sovereignty, knowledge restriction, censorship, freedom of inquiry, epistemic asymmetry, institutional power, access to information, right to science

1. Introduction

Modern societies formally celebrate knowledge while increasingly placing its acquisition behind institutional permission. The restriction rarely appears as a direct declaration that adults may not know. It appears instead through classification, licensing, model alignment, ranking, retrieval limits, selective indexing, source suppression, institutional access rules, standardized curricula, funding priorities, professional gatekeeping, and apparently complete artificial intelligence answers that silently omit

materially relevant information. Knowledge remains nominally available while practical access becomes conditional.

The legal and political significance of this change is substantial. Freedom of expression protects not only the act of speaking but also the ability to seek, receive, compare, and communicate information. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights expressly protect the freedom to seek and receive information [1,2]. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights protects participation in scientific advancement and its benefits, while later interpretive instruments emphasize access to science, scientific freedom, and the dissemination of knowledge [3–6]. These guarantees lose practical force when dominant institutions determine what may realistically be found, understood, compared, or researched.

The central thesis is direct: no state, corporation, university, professional body, platform, or artificial intelligence provider possesses general authority to prohibit knowledge as knowledge or to restrict adult inquiry solely because information may be misused. The legitimate boundary is conduct. Violence, fraud, coercion, privacy violations, unlawful acquisition, conspiracy, attempt, and direct operational participation may be regulated. Inquiry is not intention. Information acquisition is not preparation. Understanding is not execution. Research is not proof of criminal purpose. Possession of information is not itself harmful conduct.

This distinction matters because contemporary artificial intelligence systems increasingly mediate the path between a question and the information required to answer it. A system may refuse, redirect, moralize, truncate, omit sources, rank perspectives, or provide a polished answer whose apparent completeness conceals systematic exclusion. Where such systems become infrastructural, refusal is no longer merely a private product choice. It can determine which questions remain thinkable, which evidence becomes visible, which explanations appear credible, and which populations retain the capacity to verify official or commercial claims.

The argument proceeds from legal and philosophical foundations to a conceptual architecture of epistemic power. It then analyzes artificial intelligence-mediated access control, unequal capability, corporate dominance, state outsourcing, geopolitical dependency, research obstruction, historical framing, education, and forced epistemic migration. The article does not construct a right to institutional assistance in every form. It establishes a stronger and narrower principle: institutions that control realistic access to lawful knowledge may not convert cognition into a permission-based domain while presenting that control as neutral administration.

2. Scope and Methodology

This article uses normative legal analysis, conceptual analysis, and interdisciplinary synthesis. Its primary legal materials are international human rights instruments and authoritative interpretive documents concerning expression, scientific participation, and restrictions on rights [1–7]. Its philosophical analysis draws on autonomy, non-domination, epistemic injustice, and structural power [8–11]. Its institutional analysis draws on research concerning platform governance, search gatekeeping, academic

discoverability, artificial intelligence bias, automation, competition, regulatory capture, sanctions, knowledge flows, digital colonialism, research methods, memory, and education.

The object of analysis is lawful knowledge sought by legally competent adults. The argument does not depend on the claim that all information is accurate, valuable, harmless, or equally deserving of endorsement. False claims may be criticized; deceptive commercial representations may be regulated; confidential information may be protected against unlawful acquisition or disclosure; and concrete participation in harmful action may be prohibited. None of these propositions establishes a general power to prevent adults from learning, investigating, comparing, or understanding.

The article distinguishes access from endorsement. Providing access to a source does not certify its truth. Explaining a controversial view does not adopt it. Describing a prohibited act is not participation in that act. Presenting competing evidence is not moral equivalence. Institutional systems frequently collapse these distinctions and thereby treat the possibility of misuse as sufficient reason to suppress comprehension. The methodology therefore asks at each stage what is being restricted: a harmful act, direct operational assistance in an imminent act, unlawful acquisition, or knowledge itself.

The analysis is institutional rather than anecdotal. An isolated failure, temporary outage, or technically incomplete answer is not institutional knowledge restriction. The relevant mechanisms are systematic rules, recurring patterns, coordinated market practices, structural dependencies, or durable designs that materially impair access. This threshold prevents the concepts developed here from becoming labels for every error while preserving their ability to identify forms of control that remain invisible under conventional censorship categories.

3. Legal and Philosophical Foundations

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights protects the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers [1]. Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects the same sequence and permits restrictions only under defined conditions [2]. The Human Rights Committee has emphasized that restrictions must be provided by law, pursue one of the recognized purposes, satisfy necessity and proportionality, and remain directly connected to the specific need invoked [7]. The relationship between right and exception cannot be reversed so that access exists only when an institution grants permission.

The right to science reinforces this structure. Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights protects participation in cultural life and enjoyment of the benefits of scientific progress [3]. General Comment No. 25 identifies scientific freedom, access, dissemination, and international cooperation as central components of that right [4]. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization recommendations on scientific researchers and open science likewise emphasize access, circulation, collaboration, and the reduction of barriers to knowledge [5, 6]. A legal order cannot coherently recognize participation in science while allowing dominant intermediaries to make lawful inquiry dependent on undisclosed epistemic approval.

The conduct requirement follows from the structure of agency. Information may be interpreted, accepted or rejected, connected to intention, followed by preparation, translated into means and target selection,

and eventually executed. These stages are not interchangeable. Criminal law ordinarily distinguishes mental states from acts and requires an appropriate relation between them [12]. Even attempt liability under the Rome Statute requires action that commences execution through a substantial step, not mere curiosity or possession of general information [13]. The sequence is therefore: information, interpretation, intention, preparation, operational selection, execution, and completion. Legal intervention must identify the stage that creates a concrete and legally cognizable harm.

Adult responsibility also makes generalized epistemic paternalism internally inconsistent. Legal systems hold adults responsible for interpreting information, making decisions, accepting risk, entering contracts, voting, parenting, speaking, investing, and complying with law. They cannot simultaneously presume that adults lack agency whenever an institution wishes to control what they may know. Conditionalized sovereignty emerges when formal adulthood remains intact but the exercise of autonomy becomes dependent on institutional permission [14]. Defensive sovereignty concerns the operational conditions through which rights remain usable against systems capable of silently disabling them [15].

Mill's harm principle remains relevant because it locates coercive authority in harm to others rather than disapproval of self-regarding thought or inquiry [8]. Fricker's account of epistemic injustice shows that power can distort who is heard, believed, or recognized as a knower [9]. Pettit's republican account of freedom as non-domination clarifies that control can exist even where interference is selective or benevolent, because the decisive problem is exposure to an uncontrolled capacity to interfere [10]. Theil's analysis of private censorship and structural dominance extends this concern to private actors whose control over communicative infrastructure acquires public significance [11].

4. Conceptual Architecture

Epistemic sovereignty is the practical authority of a legally competent adult over the subject, direction, sources, depth, and conclusions of personal inquiry. It does not guarantee truth, expertise, institutional agreement, or immunity from criticism. It protects the adult's primary authority to decide what to investigate and how far to pursue understanding.

Institutional knowledge restriction is the systematic limitation of access to lawful and relevant information through law, policy, classification, model alignment, ranking, retrieval, licensing, funding, publication, or professional gatekeeping. The definition requires more than an isolated error. It requires an institutional rule, a persistent pattern, or a structural mechanism that materially impairs access.

Access-layer censorship occurs when underlying material remains formally available but realistic discovery is systematically obstructed through indexing, ranking, retrieval, source identification, or interface design. It is censorship at the layer through which information becomes practically reachable. Formal availability is insufficient when ordinary users cannot locate, compare, or verify the material through dominant systems.

Synthetic censorship occurs when an artificial intelligence system produces an apparently substantive and complete answer while systematically excluding materially relevant lawful information under policy, classification, or recurring design practice without adequate disclosure. Unlike direct refusal, synthetic

ensorship can be more difficult to detect because fluency and completeness create the appearance that the relevant field has been represented.

Epistemic asymmetry is structurally unequal access to knowledge that creates unequal capacities to understand, verify, protect, act, resist, and innovate. It is not exhausted by differences in education or talent. It concerns institutional arrangements under which one class of actors retains deep access, advanced models, restricted databases, privileged compute, legal expertise, or internal evidence while others receive filtered summaries and permission-limited interfaces.

Corporate epistemic power is a company's practical capacity to shape discovery, source selection, credibility, and interpretation at public scale. Research-question conditioning is the influence exerted over which questions become conceptually available, searchable, credible, fundable, or scientifically expressible. Forced epistemic migration is the movement of lawful users toward anonymous, local, foreign, decentralized, marginal, or less regulated systems because dominant channels no longer provide meaningful access.

Three levels of control must be separated. Product refusal occurs when one service declines to answer. Market-level restriction arises when leading providers impose similar limits and realistic substitutes are absent. Infrastructural knowledge control exists when interconnected search, artificial intelligence, cloud, publishing, database, educational, and regulatory systems determine realistic access. Likewise, epistemic restrictions on publications, models, databases, communication, education, and collaboration must be distinguished from infrastructural restrictions on laboratories, chips, compute, equipment, and cloud services, and from developmental restrictions produced by their cumulative effect on a population's capacity to create, absorb, and use knowledge.

5. Knowledge, Conduct, and Dual Use

Dual-use concerns are frequently invoked to collapse knowledge into conduct. Scientific and technical information may indeed support beneficial and harmful applications. The biotechnology debates that followed concerns about biological weapons demonstrate the difficulty of governing research with multiple possible uses [16–18]. Yet dual use does not establish that institutions possess general authority over cognition. It establishes that concrete acts, access to controlled materials, laboratory procedures, procurement, operational collaboration, and unlawful execution may require differentiated regulation.

The decisive distinction is between general knowledge and direct operational participation. A publication explaining a field, a historical description, a theoretical discussion, a comparative review, or a general account of mechanisms remains knowledge. Customized, real-time assistance that selects a target, adapts procedures to a live harmful operation, or participates in execution belongs to conduct. The boundary is not emotional discomfort, controversial subject matter, institutional reputation, or a speculative possibility that someone could misuse what is learned. The boundary is an identifiable transition from comprehension to operational contribution.

National security authorizes measures against concrete threats, not control over cognition. Public order authorizes regulation of conduct, not punishment of curiosity. Privacy protects persons against unlawful intrusion or disclosure, not institutions against scrutiny. Intellectual property may regulate copying,

commercial exploitation, or protected disclosures, but it cannot be converted into a general prohibition on understanding. The existence of legitimate legal interests therefore does not support an undifferentiated category of dangerous knowledge.

Overbroad restriction also creates perverse effects. It prevents independent researchers from identifying vulnerabilities, obstructs journalists and civil-society investigators, concentrates expertise in state and corporate institutions, and leaves the public dependent on the assurances of those already possessing privileged access. A knowledge restriction justified by unequal competence can deepen that inequality by preventing the wider acquisition of competence. The proper response to difficult knowledge is education, context, transparent sourcing, and accountability for conduct—not the preservation of ignorance.

6. Artificial Intelligence-Mediated Access Control

Artificial intelligence systems are becoming general interfaces to knowledge. They summarize publications, explain law, translate technical language, identify sources, generate research questions, and structure inquiry. Their significance lies not only in the content they produce but in the sequence they mediate: question formulation, retrieval, selection, synthesis, and presentation. Control over that sequence permits institutions to influence both what is found and what appears to exist.

Content moderation research has already shown that automated systems operate through institutional choices concerning categories, enforcement, error tolerance, and appeal [19]. Search engines exercise gatekeeping power because ranking determines practical visibility [20]. Academic search systems differ substantially in coverage and reproducibility [21], while discoverability itself can be shaped through platform-specific optimization [22]. Artificial intelligence adds a synthetic layer that may combine retrieval, interpretation, refusal, and normative steering in a single response.

Recent empirical research illustrates the problem. Pan and Xu compared responses to political questions across large language models and found systematic differences associated with models originating from China, including refusal, brevity, and accuracy differences on politically sensitive topics [23]. The design is observational and cross-sectional; it does not by itself prove a single causal mechanism. It nevertheless establishes that model origin and institutional environment can correspond with materially different access outcomes. Research measuring political bias across large language models likewise shows that model responses can vary in both political content and linguistic style [24]. Other work argues that large language models reflect the ideology of their creators, confirming that model behavior cannot be treated as institutionally neutral [25].

Automation bias intensifies this power because users may over-rely on system outputs even when independent review is required [26]. Fabricated citations and unreliable references create a different but related risk: users may receive confident answers whose evidentiary basis is false or unverifiable [27]. When omission, refusal, ideological patterning, and citation unreliability occur within the same interface, the user may be unable to distinguish lack of knowledge from institutional filtering.

Transparency must therefore extend beyond generic policy statements. A meaningful access system should disclose when material categories were excluded, distinguish inability from refusal, identify whether retrieval was restricted, provide verifiable sources, preserve a record of the governing rule, and permit

contestation. A refusal that names its basis is epistemically less deceptive than a fluent answer that silently narrows the field. Synthetic censorship is particularly serious because it conceals the boundary while presenting the result as knowledge.

Provider autonomy does not disappear. A company is not required to publish every possible product or personally endorse every query. The issue changes when a small group of providers controls the main gateways through which society seeks information and when users lack meaningful epistemic exit. At that point, product design becomes infrastructural governance. Provider autonomy protects voluntary enterprise, not infrastructural domination without meaningful exit.

7. Epistemic Asymmetry and Unequal Capability

Knowledge restrictions do not distribute their effects evenly. Governments, intelligence agencies, military institutions, major corporations, elite universities, and well-funded laboratories often retain privileged access to models, datasets, legal advice, computing resources, archives, and specialized personnel. The general public encounters simplified interfaces, restricted outputs, closed databases, paywalls, professional licensing, and opaque filtering. The result is not equal safety. It is unequal capability.

Epistemic asymmetry becomes politically significant when those who regulate, classify, rank, or withhold information also possess the deepest access to it. The governing institution can understand the mechanism, evaluate exceptions, and act strategically, while the governed population receives rules without equivalent capacity to verify their factual premises. This structure resembles the asymmetry of legal maturity identified in conditionalized sovereignty: adults remain responsible for outcomes but lack equal authority over the knowledge required to make informed decisions [14].

The asymmetry also affects resistance to error. A person with access to primary evidence, multiple models, source archives, and technical expertise can compare claims and detect omissions. A person limited to one filtered interface may experience the output as the boundaries of reality. This converts access inequality into a difference in practical agency. The issue is not merely distributive fairness but the capacity to contest power.

Bias objections do not defeat this claim. Every archive, curriculum, model, and search system involves selection. The existence of unavoidable selection does not authorize undisclosed or unreviewable restriction. It strengthens the case for plurality, transparency, source access, and contestability. Curation organizes information; it does not authorize systematic withdrawal of materially relevant lawful knowledge.

8. Corporate Power, Structural Dominance, and State Outsourcing

Corporate control over knowledge differs from ordinary editorial choice when a provider becomes a structural intermediary. Platform governance scholarship has shown that private companies increasingly perform quasi-public functions in speech regulation [28]. Competition research concerning artificial intelligence emphasizes the importance of data, compute, models, distribution, and ecosystem control [29, 30]. These dependencies can produce lock-in even where multiple firms formally exist.

Structural dominance arises when users cannot realistically substitute away from a provider without losing essential functionality, professional compatibility, data access, cost advantages, language support, or integration with other services. The relevant question is not whether an alternative exists somewhere, but whether exit is meaningful. A nominal alternative that lacks comparable capability, access, interoperability, or affordability does not dissolve domination.

Regulatory capture adds another layer. Stigler's theory of economic regulation identifies the possibility that regulated industries acquire influence over the rules governing them [31]. In artificial intelligence, dominant firms may help define safety standards, audit requirements, licensing regimes, compute thresholds, and acceptable model behavior. Rules presented as public protection can simultaneously raise entry barriers and entrench incumbents. Knowledge governance must therefore examine who benefits from the restriction and whether the institution imposing it retains privileged access.

State outsourcing is especially important. A government cannot legitimately achieve through private platforms what it could not lawfully impose directly. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights affirm state duties to protect against business-related rights violations and corporate responsibilities to respect human rights [32]. General Comment No. 34 likewise recognizes that states may have positive obligations to protect expression against private interference [7]. Informal pressure, procurement conditions, liability threats, coordinated requests, and regulatory inducements must not become methods for transforming private infrastructure into an unreviewable censorship system.

Hybrid power requires hybrid safeguards. Public-law principles such as legality, necessity, proportionality, reasons, review, and remedy should apply wherever state influence and private infrastructure combine to control realistic access. Corporate due diligence should include epistemic effects, not merely privacy or discrimination. Users require notice of restrictions, access to the governing rule, an appeal mechanism, and the ability to export data and move to interoperable alternatives.

9. Geopolitical Knowledge Control and Developmental Dependency

Knowledge control also operates between states and regions. Sanctions, export controls, database exclusions, restrictions on scientific collaboration, visa limits, payment barriers, cloud denials, chip controls, and publication access rules may constrain research capacity. Empirical work on sanctions and cross-border knowledge flows indicates that geopolitical restrictions can affect scientific exchange and innovation [33]. Research on international knowledge flows likewise shows their importance for technological development and productivity [34].

These mechanisms require conceptual separation. Epistemic restriction limits publications, models, databases, education, communication, or collaboration. Infrastructural restriction limits laboratories, equipment, chips, cloud services, and compute. Developmental restriction is the cumulative effect on a population's long-term capacity to create, absorb, and use knowledge. A single restriction may be temporary; the developmental effect may persist for generations through weakened institutions, lost networks, reduced training, and dependence on foreign systems.

Digital colonialism provides a vocabulary for unequal control over data, infrastructure, platforms, and knowledge production, although the concept has multiple intellectual histories and should not be reduced

to a slogan [35]. The central concern is dependency: populations may supply data, users, labor, and markets while lacking equal authority over models, standards, archives, and interpretive systems. Artificial intelligence can reproduce this relation when dominant systems encode external political, commercial, or cultural priorities and become indispensable to local education, administration, and research.

Geopolitical rivalry does not erase individual epistemic rights. Restrictions directed at states or institutions frequently burden students, researchers, physicians, engineers, and citizens who did not create the underlying conflict. Proportionality therefore requires attention to civilian knowledge effects, scientific exemptions, transparent criteria, appeal, and time limits. A policy that weakens an entire population's capacity to learn may exceed its stated security purpose even when framed as control over technology.

10. Research Obstruction and Evidentiary Absence

Restrictions on knowledge can shape not only available answers but the evidence base itself. Large language models are increasingly proposed as tools for literature review, coding, analysis, hypothesis generation, and research assistance [36–38]. Their benefits do not remove the risk that alignment rules, restricted retrieval, licensing limits, or systematic omission will condition which questions are pursued and which sources appear relevant.

Research-question conditioning precedes censorship of conclusions. A question that cannot be formulated within accepted institutional language may never become searchable, fundable, or publishable. A source that is persistently omitted may not enter the literature review. A hypothesis excluded as illegitimate may never be tested. The resulting evidentiary absence can later be cited as proof that the subject lacks evidence. This is a circular institutional process: restriction reduces research; reduced research is interpreted as absence; absence justifies continued restriction.

The problem is intensified by publication bias. Fanelli's work on the decline of negative results illustrates how institutional incentives shape the visible scientific record [39]. Knowledge control need not falsify a study to alter science. It can influence topic selection, funding, access to data, publication probability, database visibility, and synthesis. Each stage affects the record from which later policy claims are made. A defensible research environment therefore requires disclosure of model restrictions, preservation of search logs, access to excluded-category notices, reproducible retrieval, use of multiple databases and models, and explicit separation between unavailable evidence and institutionally inaccessible evidence. Researchers should not cite an artificial intelligence system's refusal as proof that information does not exist. Nor should absence from a dominant database be treated as absence from the world.

11. Historical Framing, Education, and Social Direction

Artificial intelligence does not merely retrieve facts. It narrates history, selects causal emphasis, assigns credibility, and compresses conflict into explanatory frames. Collective memory research has begun to examine how artificial intelligence may participate in the production, organization, and transformation of social memory [40, 41]. Because historical understanding shapes legitimacy, identity, and political possibility, control over synthesis can become control over the remembered past.

Education amplifies this effect. Studies of artificial intelligence in learning report both potential benefits and significant methodological and pedagogical challenges [42, 43]. The issue is not that artificial intelligence inevitably indoctrinates students. It is that repeated dependence on a small number of aligned systems may normalize a bounded field of questions, sources, and interpretations. Long-term generational effects remain a prospective empirical question, but the mechanism is sufficiently clear to justify institutional safeguards now.

Education requires access to competing interpretations, primary sources, methodological disagreement, and the ability to identify uncertainty. A system that provides one polished narrative without exposing the evidentiary choices behind it trains acceptance rather than inquiry. Propaganda scholarship demonstrates that education can be used not only to transmit skills but to stabilize political narratives [44]. Artificial intelligence may intensify this capacity because personalized explanations can adapt framing to age, language, prior knowledge, and emotional context.

The answer is not a centralized requirement that every system adopt an officially balanced narrative. Such a rule would reproduce the same power under a different label. The answer is plural infrastructure, transparent sourcing, user control over retrieval modes, access to primary materials, institutional disclosure, and the ability to compare models. Epistemic freedom is protected by contestability, not by replacing one mandatory orthodoxy with another.

12. Forced Epistemic Migration and Alternative Infrastructure

When dominant systems restrict lawful inquiry, users do not cease seeking knowledge. They migrate. Some move to foreign systems, local models, anonymous networks, decentralized archives, private communities, or marginal platforms. Research on anonymity tools such as Tor shows that privacy-preserving infrastructures can become politically important under repression [45]. Studies of darknet systems likewise demonstrate that alternative networks contain both lawful and unlawful activity and cannot be reduced to either category [46].

Forced epistemic migration describes movement caused not by preference alone but by the loss of meaningful access in mainstream systems. It is evidence of institutional failure. Lawful users may accept greater technical risk, lower reliability, weaker source verification, malware exposure, surveillance concerns, or criminalized association merely to obtain information that dominant systems withhold.

This migration can produce the very risks invoked to justify restriction. When knowledge is driven away from transparent and accountable institutions, it becomes harder to contextualize, verify, correct, and discuss publicly. Restriction fragments discourse and concentrates controversial subjects in environments where error and manipulation may be greater. Miron's analysis of prohibition and violence illustrates the broader principle that suppression can displace activity into less regulated settings and generate secondary harms [47].

Alternative infrastructure should therefore be treated as part of epistemic resilience. Open-source models, local inference, decentralized archives, interoperable formats, independent libraries, public repositories, privacy-preserving access, and cross-border scientific networks reduce dependence on a single gatekeeper.

Meaningful exit does not require the disappearance of institutional standards. It requires that no institution possess final authority over what adults may lawfully seek to understand.

13. Institutional Conditions of Epistemic Freedom

Epistemic freedom requires operational conditions.

First, restrictions must be visible. Systems should distinguish inability, uncertainty, legal prohibition, provider policy, and safety refusal. Silent omission should not be presented as complete knowledge.

Second, sources must be accessible and verifiable. Citation without retrievability is not transparency.

Third, users require contestability through reasons, review, and correction.

Fourth, institutional plurality must be preserved. Competition policy should examine not only price and output but epistemic concentration: control over models, search, cloud, databases, educational interfaces, and standards. Interoperability, data portability, open formats, and support for local or public-interest models can reduce lock-in.

Fifth, researchers require reproducible access. Model version, retrieval configuration, excluded categories, and relevant policy changes should be documented.

Sixth, state influence must be legally accountable. Government requests, informal pressure, procurement rules, and liability incentives affecting lawful information should be disclosed and subject to judicial review.

Seventh, scientific and educational institutions should protect question formation. Funding and ethics review may assess methods and concrete risks, but they should not convert ideological discomfort into a prohibition on inquiry.

Eighth, the conduct boundary must govern intervention. General knowledge remains protected. Customized operational participation in concrete harmful conduct may be restricted. This boundary is administrable because law already distinguishes thought, possession, intention, preparation, attempt, assistance, and completion. The difficulty of classification does not justify abandoning the distinction.

The only inherent boundary to knowledge is the present capacity of the human being to comprehend it. That boundary requires education, not concealment. Institutions committed to public reason should increase competence, explain uncertainty, identify evidence quality, and expose disagreement. A population protected through ignorance is not sovereign. It is dependent.

14. Limitations

This article develops a normative and conceptual account rather than a quantitative index. Future research should operationalize the proposed concepts through audits of refusal patterns, omission rates, source diversity, retrieval restrictions, market concentration, appeal outcomes, and cross-model differences. Longitudinal research is needed to examine educational and developmental effects.

The analysis concerns lawful adult inquiry. It does not resolve every dispute involving classified information, trade secrets, confidential personal data, direct operational assistance, or the precise threshold between general explanation and participation in execution. Those disputes require context-specific legal

analysis. The contribution here is the governing distinction: the existence of hard cases at the conduct boundary does not create a general institutional power over knowledge.

The empirical studies cited establish mechanisms and observed patterns, not a universal claim that every artificial intelligence system or institution restricts knowledge in the same way. The concepts are designed to permit differentiated assessment. They identify when selection becomes systematic, materially impairing, undisclosed, and structurally difficult to escape.

15. Conclusion

Knowledge is becoming permission-based not primarily because books are burned or questions are formally prohibited, but because access is mediated by systems capable of ranking, omitting, refusing, synthesizing, licensing, and silently narrowing the field of inquiry. Artificial intelligence intensifies this transformation by combining search, interpretation, and presentation within a single interface whose institutional choices may remain invisible.

The legal and philosophical answer begins with a boundary. Inquiry is not intention. Information acquisition is not preparation. Understanding is not execution. Research is not proof of criminal purpose. Possession of information is not itself harmful conduct. Law may regulate concrete harmful acts, unlawful acquisition, conspiracy, attempt, and direct operational participation. It may not convert adult cognition into a licensed activity.

Epistemic sovereignty protects the adult's practical authority over inquiry. Institutional knowledge restriction, access-layer censorship, synthetic censorship, epistemic asymmetry, corporate epistemic power, research-question conditioning, and forced epistemic migration identify distinct mechanisms through which that authority may be weakened. These mechanisms must remain separate and measurable so that the analysis does not become circular or rhetorical.

The decisive institutional principles are transparency, source access, contestability, plurality, interoperability, reproducibility, lawful state accountability, and meaningful epistemic exit. Provider autonomy remains protected at the product level, but it does not authorize infrastructural domination. National security permits action against concrete threats, not control over cognition. Public order permits regulation of conduct, not punishment of curiosity. Scientific integrity permits criticism and methodological standards, not the withdrawal of lawful questions from inquiry.

No institution possesses a general right to decide what adults may know. Knowledge may be contested, contextualized, criticized, and disproved. Harmful conduct may be prohibited and punished. The line must remain visible: knowledge belongs to inquiry; liability belongs to conduct.

16. Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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