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Three Challenges for Media Studies in the Age of Platforms

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tnv**Thomas Poell¹****Abstract**

Digital platforms, from Instagram to Spotify, have become central to the production, distribution, and monetization of cultural content. This essay discusses how this process of platformization poses three interrelated challenges for the research on and governance of contemporary cultural industries. First, platformization complicates the question of media concentration, as platform corporations integrate highly diverse businesses, not only hosting and curating media content, but also functioning as advertising networks, data intermediaries, and so on. Second, it thwarts the regulation of media content, as platforms channel vast amounts of heterogeneous materials, shared by a broad range of users, making it extremely difficult to maintain oversight. Third, the growing dominance of platform corporations over the cultural domain makes it vital, but also difficult, to develop and sustain online public service media and alternative noncommercial platforms. The essay closes by discussing how these challenges can and should be addressed from the perspective of media studies.

Keywords

platformization, cultural industries, media studies, media concentration, media regulation, public service media

Introduction

Digital platforms have become central to the production, distribution, and monetization of cultural content. The news industry was one of the first to be deeply affected by platformization. Especially the emergence of search engines and social media

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undermined ad revenue and enabled Internet users to directly access and share individual news items. This led to what Nicolas Carr (2008) has called “The Great Unbundling”: the breakdown of the audience-content-advertising configuration. In this process, control over how news content is recommended, distributed, and monetized shifts from news organizations to platforms (Nielsen and Ganter 2018). A similar transformation has occurred in the music industry with peer-to-peer file sharing technologies and music platforms such as Spotify and Soundcloud enabling users to find, share, and consume music online, which undermines the autonomy and traditional business model of music companies (Eriksson et al. 2019). While the television industry appeared largely insulated from platformization for a long time, in recent years both commercial and public broadcasters increasingly distribute content through YouTube and other digital platforms (Sehl et al. 2018). Simultaneously, these broadcasters are experiencing growing competition from streaming services, such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+, and HBO (Lobato 2019; Lotz 2017). Finally, platforms have spawned entirely new industrial formations. Most prominently, social media entertainment and social games have blossomed into major industries in less than a decade (Cunningham and Craig 2019; Nieborg and Poell 2018). These industries are highly dependent on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitch, and other platforms to reach audiences and generate ad revenue.

Platformization poses crucial challenges for the research on and governance of contemporary cultural industries. My commentary for *Television & New Media*'s twentieth anniversary issue highlights three interrelated challenges and discusses how these challenges can be addressed from the perspective of media studies. While a relatively new field, media studies is well positioned between more traditional scholarly disciplines to provide new insights in the mechanisms and implications of platformization, which involves simultaneous technological, economic, and sociopolitical changes. More specifically, platformization can be understood as the penetration of economic, infrastructural, and governmental extensions of digital platforms in the cultural industries, as well as the reorganization of cultural production and distribution practices around these platforms (Poell et al. 2019). This process leads to major conundrums for researchers and policymakers alike.

Challenge I: Media Concentration

First, platformization complicates the question of media concentration, as platform corporations integrate highly diverse businesses, not only hosting and curating media content, but also functioning as advertising networks, data intermediaries, social networking and identity services, content production companies, and software and hardware manufacturers (Van Dijck et al. 2019). An extreme example of this is Alphabet, which among others operates Google Search (the most popular search engine), YouTube (the dominant video-sharing platform), Google Play (one of the two largest app stores), Android (the dominant mobile operating system), and Google Ads (the leading digital advertising network). Each of these services can be considered as platforms in its own right, tying together end-users, content producers, advertisers,

societal institutions, app developers, and hardware manufacturers. Crucial to note is that these services or platforms do not operate in isolation, but are inextricably entangled with each other within a larger corporate ecosystem. Within this ecosystem, the platform company sets and continuously changes the conditions under which content and services can be distributed and monetized. It does so through algorithmic sorting, graphical user and application programming interfaces, as well as through policies, terms, guidelines, and related moderation practices (Bucher 2018; Gillespie 2018).

A striking example of how this impacts the distribution and monetization of cultural content is the so-called YouTube Adpocalypse. During this infamous episode, in the spring of 2017, major advertisers boycotted the platform because it became clear that some of their ads were paired with extremist videos. In response, Google changed YouTube's advertising policies, enabling advertisers to exclude broad content categories. In turn, this strongly affected YouTube's creator community, satirical and news-oriented videos were particularly impacted as they were "demonetized," with some creators losing over 80% of their ad revenue (Weiss 2017). These creators were confronted with the choice to either change the content of their videos or find alternative monetization strategies through other platforms (Kumar 2019). While the advertising revenue of most prominent YouTube creators was quickly restored, this episode is only one of many instances in which the conditions under which YouTube videos are produced, distributed, and monetized have substantially shifted (Burgess and Green 2018). These shifts not only take shape on YouTube itself, via changes to its Partner Program, recommendation algorithms, creator guidelines, and moderation practices, but also through alterations in Alphabet's wider ecosystem. Policy changes in Google's advertising platform directly impact creator revenue, whereas adjustments in Google Search algorithms can have large consequences for the visibility and reach of YouTube clips across platforms. Similarly, the development of Android and Google Play affects the overall use of YouTube.

These intricate connections challenge traditional understandings of media concentration (Winseck 2008). Analyzing how corporate power sets the conditions for cultural production, we cannot simply focus on YouTube, but must examine the techno-economic configuration of the larger corporate ecosystem in which the platform is embedded (Van Dijck et al. 2019). This also applies when we consider the alternatives open to creators to distribute and monetize their videos beyond YouTube. Examining the platform in isolation, there appear to be lots of competing video-sharing services, which allow creators to reach audiences and generate revenue. Yet, these services have a hard time competing with YouTube, as its dominance in the online video industry is enabled and sustained by Alphabet's larger platform ecosystem through which it successfully aggregates large numbers of users, creators, and advertisers. Given the nature of multisided markets, this, in turn, generates powerful network effects that further consolidate YouTube's dominant position (Evans and Schmalensee 2016; Rochet and Tirole 2003).

Thus, platformization forces us to consider media concentration in terms of corporate ecosystems. As Lina Khan (2017, 710) has pointed out in the case of Amazon, this has major legal implications: the position of leading platform companies as "critical

intermediaries, integrating across business lines,” challenges current antitrust frameworks. For media studies, the puzzle is to understand how cultural production is shaped within corporate platform ecosystems and what the economic, political, and creative implications are for cultural producers.

Challenge 2: Regulation

Platformization also greatly complicates the regulation of media content. Digital platforms channel vast amounts of fundamentally heterogeneous materials: from personal updates to news, and from games to fashion photography. This content is shared by a broad range of users, including mass media, societal organizations and institutions, a wide variety of companies, and billions of end-users. The scale and variety of content and users makes it extremely difficult for platform corporations to maintain oversight. This has generated all sorts of problems.

Over the past years, especially Facebook, in the light of the widespread circulation of misinformation and propaganda, has struggled with its role in public communication (Benkler et al. 2018; Frenkel et al. 2018). Although the company has elaborate Terms of Service and Community Standards in place, which it tries to enforce through automated and manual moderation practices, it has stumbled from one controversy to the next (Gillespie 2018; Gorwa et al. 2020). Facebook has not only failed to prevent misinformation, hate speech, and extremist content from circulating, but it has also censored content that should, according to public opinion, be allowed on the platform. A particularly striking example of the latter is Facebook’s repeated removal of the famous 1972 *Terror of War* picture of a naked 9-year-old girl, running along a road after an accidental U.S. napalm attack in Southern Vietnam. In 2016, these filtering practices sparked controversy, when a Norwegian newspaper publicly confronted the platform, arguing that the photograph constitutes an important historical document. In this case, Facebook gave in and allowed the image to be shared on the platform (Van Dijck et al. 2018). Such controversies are only the tip of the iceberg. Facebook, like YouTube and other platforms, has a long history of removing content that is of historical, political, social, and cultural importance, while simultaneously letting profoundly problematic content circulate (Gillespie 2018).

Fixing content moderation is particularly difficult, as it is not altogether clear how the responsibility for platform communication should be distributed among different stakeholders. Clearly, platforms play a pivotal role, but not in the same way as mass media, given that potentially everyone can share content through a platform. While there have been proposals to give platform corporations similar responsibilities as media companies, it is highly questionable whether it is a good idea to give corporations, with little editorial expertise or understanding of particular political-cultural contexts and histories, full editorial responsibility over what is shared through their platforms. In light of how platform communication is organized, it appears more appropriate to develop a governance model of cooperative responsibility (Helberger et al. 2018). In such a model, platform corporations open up the overall operations and development of platform architectures and moderations practices to democratic

assessment and control by citizens and public authorities. Designing such a model requires not just technical and legal expertise, but also insights from media studies scholars into how platform affordances and user practices mutually affect each other.

Challenge 3: Alternatives

Finally, the growing dominance of platform corporations over the cultural domain means that it is vital to develop and sustain online public service media and alternative noncommercial platforms. Yet, it also means that it has become especially difficult to do so.

Starting with the need for alternatives. As discussed, platform companies have a history of removing content of historical and political-cultural importance. This has proven especially problematic for social movements, marginal communities, and alternative forms of cultural expression (Gillespie 2018; Youmans and York 2012). More generally, commercial platforms tend to develop their interfaces and algorithmic systems in correspondence with business models that revolve around systematic data collection, user profiling, and personalized advertising services. These practices are strongly in tension with personal privacy and autonomy, as well as with societal values of equality, transparency, and accuracy (Couldry and Mejias 2019; Turow 2011; Van Dijck et al. 2018). Commercial platforms are geared toward maximizing user activity by algorithmically privileging trending items over content that generates sustained social engagement. Even though platforms enable the circulation of a wide range of cultural products and forms of expression, platformization is not necessarily conducive to a diverse cultural landscape and democratic public sphere.

The current organization of the platform ecosystem makes it especially challenging to develop sustainable alternatives, as leading platform corporations control the basic infrastructure on which other actors, including public service media and alternative websites and platforms, have come to rely. The search engines, social networks, photo- and video-sharing services, messaging apps, operating systems, app stores, and cloud services operated by these corporations shape the visibility and access to cultural content. Thus, providing an alternative to commercial platforms entails more than developing alternative content, but must also involve interventions in the online infrastructure through which content is distributed and recommended. How this should be done is, however, by no means self-evident. Given that platforms within corporate ecosystems are closely entangled and mutually reinforcing, it is very much the question whether it is feasible to develop standalone alternative services or platforms. Furthermore, as leading platform companies have already successfully aggregated significant numbers of users, cultural producers, advertisers, data intermediaries, and other third parties, network effects make it exceedingly difficult for newcomers to break into specific markets. In light of these challenges, policy and legal measures must support and complement public or alternative interventions in online infrastructures. Interdisciplinary research is needed to determine what mixture of measures is needed to accomplish an online infrastructure based on key public values.

Media Studies

To address these challenges, a variety of disciplines need to be combined (Nieborg and Poell 2018). Business studies scholars and economists have developed crucial insights in multisided market relations. In combination with critical political economic research, these insights are essential for understanding the economic difficulties faced by cultural producers in a platform environment. In turn, software and platform studies enable us to apprehend the techno-commercial infrastructures of platforms and the interrelations between platforms in a larger ecosystem. Combining these insights is crucial to understand why platform corporations find it so difficult to moderate and algorithmically organize the constant stream of content. Moreover, these disciplines help us to gain insight the challenge of intervening in the platform ecosystem to promote public values. Pursuing such an objective, legal expertise is also indispensable, as it becomes increasingly clear that platforms cannot be adequately regulated based on established legal frameworks. Finally, cultural studies research is needed to gain insight in the lived realities of platform-based labor and user interactions. This is important to develop regulations and alternatives that correspond with the needs and interests of users.

Whereas each of these disciplines helps to illuminate particular aspects of platforms and the types of political economic, technological, and sociocultural relations that develop around them, to adequately address the challenges posed by platformization, these insights need to be connected. As we have seen, the growing dominance of platform corporations in different cultural industries is simultaneously the consequence of changing market relations and technological infrastructures. The governance of such techno-commercial configurations needs to be based on a combination of legal, economic, and technological insights.

Media studies *par excellence* bring different scholarly disciplines together. As a relative new field, it builds on political economy, business studies, computer science, law, and cultural studies. Moreover, scholars in the field have been keen on combining insights from these disciplines. As such, media studies is well positioned to enhance our understanding of the intricate ways in which technologies, economic strategies, and cultural practices become entangled in the platformization of the cultural industries.

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