Review essay: the platform society: public values in a connective world

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José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, 2018, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*, Oxford University Press

Tarleton Gillespie, 2018, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media*, Yale University Press

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More than a decade after the creation of the major digital platforms we use every day, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Airbnb, it is still surprisingly difficult to define them. Anyone seeking commonalities between all these entities will face a proliferation of terms to define them, most of them loosely revolving around the idea of platforms serving as intermediaries. The complexity of their technologies or their corporate culture of secrecy further undermine the possibility of knowing exactly how they work. This opacity comes as a great paradox given the massive number of users and the plurality of sectors in which digital platforms operate today.

Researchers in internet studies and digital media studies already engage deeply with the social implications of digital technologies writ large, including platforms. The past few years have seen the publication of books that take a far more critical approach to digital technologies than authors from the aughts. Instead of emphasizing the innovative means of cultural production (Jenkins, 2006) or political mobilization (Benkler, 2006) that internet technologies afford, recent books have critically examined the social consequences of the use of social media for online mobilization (Tufekci, 2017), the applications of big data science (Schneier, 2015; O'Neil, 2017), black-boxed algorithms (Pasquale, 2015) or data-driven social services (Eubanks, 2018). Taken together, these books offer a critical reading of the largely negative social consequences of the various technologies that increasingly shape the digital infrastructures of our daily life.

Within this context and landscape, two recently published books offer a critical take on the increasing power of digital platforms play in varied social contexts worldwide. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World* (Oxford University Press, 2018) by José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, and *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (Yale University

Press, 2018), by Tarleton Gillespie, bring a compelling analysis of what platforms are, how they work, and why they matter.

José van Dijck and her co-authors provide an extensive analysis of the role of platforms in shaping social life. The starting point of their book is that as platforms have now gained a gigantic scale and level of use, they are increasingly in a position to organize sectors of important public utility, such as journalism or urban transport. However, because of a lack of clarity about platforms' status and their self-positioning as intermediaries, platforms tend to evade the social responsibilities that come with occupying such key social functions. In this context, the questions that drive the authors concern the governance of digital platforms and the compatibility between their private interests and the maintenance of public values. The authors develop this research program through a systematic investigation that merges analytical tools and case studies. After defining the architecture of platforms, they describe their expansion strategy as relying on three processes: *datafication*, i.e. systematically capturing users' data; *commodification*, i.e. transforming online and offline activity into tradable commodity; *selection* of users' data and activity. They then proceed to apply these three criteria to four case studies (concerning news, transport, health, and education), eventually showing how the platform logic challenges in each sector the compatibility between private goals and public values. With this analysis in mind, they close the book by developing suggestions for a potential regulation of platforms.

Gillespie takes a more specific approach to analyzing the social implications of platforms by focusing on content moderation. As a follow-up to his foundational article (Gillespie, 2010), where he showed how platform leaders strategically present themselves as a neutral intermediary, he describes at length in his new book how, on the contrary, platforms actively curate, choose, and select content. By uncovering all the forms that moderation takes and all the challenges it represents, content moderation reveals the "irreconcilable contradiction" of platforms (2018, p. 21), that is, presenting themselves as a mere conduit while still actively choosing what appears (or not) on their service. This tension matters given the influence that digital platforms wield in shaping public discourse, cultural production, and social relations. After defining what platforms are, focusing on the key role that moderation plays, Gillespie opens with a historical perspective on the policies that have allowed platforms to take advantage of a position of presumed neutrality. The next three chapters dissect the processes of content moderation by examining community guidelines (chapter 3), three actual

moderation techniques (chapter 4), and human moderation (chapter 5). Subsequent chapters provide case studies (for example, Facebook groups that bring together breastfeeding mothers) and highlight the (often unintended) consequences of the established moderation strategies. The book ends with a set of recommendations to improve the practice of moderation. Throughout the book, Gillespie relies on interviews with content policy managers, platform moderators, and social media users, but also on close readings of community guidelines, blog posts, and tech journalism.

Taken together, these two books complement recent works that have critically investigated the role of platforms in society, such as *Platform Capitalism* (Srnicek, 2016), that situated the rise of platforms in relation contemporary capitalism, or Benjamin Bratton's *The Stack* (2016), which uses the perspective of speculative design to study the increasingly important geopolitical role that platforms play in the current global technological landscape. Grounded in media and communication studies, the authors of *Custodians of the Internet* and of *The Platform Society* blend a political economy framework—allowing them to study the relation between economic model and power distribution—with a strong influence from the social study of technology—allowing them to show how technology shape conditions of public discourse and public values. Policy analysis also constitutes a major thread, especially when it comes to providing a history of platforms and a normative framework to study their evolution.

This theoretical foundation, mixed with the depth of the analysis and the scale of empirical investigation, positions these two books as major references to understand the most important social challenges that digital platforms bring today. Beyond their specific goals, case studies, and distinct perspectives, it is possible to extract several points that these books share.

First, the two books provide innovative definitions of platforms. Van Dijck et al. invite the reader to understand platforms not as a single application, or a website, and make a strong case to understand them as *ecosystems*. Echoing previous works (van Dijck, 2013; van Dijck & Poell, 2013), they define platforms as programmable digital architecture(s) bringing into interaction users, corporate entities, and public bodies. This ecosystem perspective also highlights the plurality of platforms that exist: they differentiate between platforms that they define as *infrastructural*, typically the "big five" (or GAFAM, for Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft), and named as such due to their scale and the

programmability they provide to third parties (e.g. the Facebook API to develop apps, the Apple App Store to sell them); the second types are *sectoral* platforms, which typically concern one specific niche activity (e.g. MOOCs in higher education) and generally rely on the online apps store, cloud computing capacities, or data from the infrastructural platforms. Viewing platforms as ecosystems also emphasizes the variety of actors brought together by this entity. If the relation between a company and its users is what comes first to mind, they have now reached a scale that makes public bodies a complete part of the ecosystem, either when the platform logic is applied to public sectors (as seen with discourses on the "government as platform"), or when city administrations or governments regulate or compensate the harms of platform activity.

Gillespie similarly provides his definition of platform by putting the activity of moderation at the center. The originality of this approach is that, in addition to providing an entrance to the readers into this often-unseen process (that we typically see through its last stage, e.g. when a post is blocked), it positions moderation as a heuristic device: what defines platform is their capacity to curate, select, and moderate the content that appears on their service. The immediate next step of this definition is to allow Gillespie to show the inherent contradiction that emerge from this positioning: despite presenting themselves as neutral intermediary, platforms must moderate their content. Seen in this light, platforms are very similar to traditional media objects and other gatekeepers (because of their activity of curation and selection of content, etc.). Yet, their capacity to constantly escape the responsibility that traditionally comes with this role differs from traditional media. The description of the Section 230 of the Communication Decency Act, passed in 1996, is a particularly useful historical context to understand all the debates about the social responsibility of platforms. This section stipulates that internet intermediaries are not to be considered as publishers, and that even if they police the content on their service, they do not lose their "safe harbor" and remain an intermediary. This legal justification of the mythical neutrality that allows platforms to thrive is key to understand the stubbornness of most of them who, despite mounting evidence, still refuse to take responsibility for their active participation in shaping online content.

The second counter-intuitive result of using moderation to define platforms is that carefully moderated content is actually the commodity that platforms sell. The example of Twitter, and how its systematic incapacity to resolve hate mails and other online abuse impedes its

growth, illustrates this best. This description of moderation as strategic commodity complements the general view of platforms, common in business and management literature, as simply aiming to reach and retain as many users as possible, to create network effects and to collect their data. While this is still true, moderation is also how a platform sustain its valuation.

Second, the two books offer a prime view on how platforms work. By systematically applying the three platform mechanisms to the four cases, van Dijck and her co-authors allow the reader to see all the variations when the same mechanisms are applied across different sectors. For example, the extent of data capture varies, from health tracking apps to students' learning pace on MOOCs, and so does the range of commodification, pushed to the extreme when Genomic Information Services, such as 23andMe, starts as a platform before monetizing their data through partnership with big pharmaceutical groups.

Gillespie methodically details all the forms that moderation takes. He traces it back to the first online communities, where self-moderation was common (typically by power users), before the emergence of automatic detection. What is striking from this historical account is how moderation is always polymorphous and evolves with times; when it is implemented, it never solves all the new problems that keep emerging when a service scales up. Despite the important consequences that poor moderation has on the personal life of users and for the company, it takes the form of a makeshift action, mixing various possibilities, none completely satisfying and efficient. What is equally striking is the ambiguous relation companies have with moderation. They constantly negate engaging in this activity, as it constitutes an acknowledgement of their agency—as opposed to their neutral positioning—they typically use other terms instead, such as "cleaning" or providing a "great user experience". Consequently, as soon as they moderate, companies have to deal with suspicions of hidden agenda, double standards, and biased points of view. The whole challenge for a platform is therefore to find the sweet spot between offering a service that is not too moderated—hence too constraining—but moderated enough to provide an enjoyable experience to users.

The third commonality is how the two books show why interrogating platforms matter for the societies they reorganize. Van Dijck et al.'s book brilliantly shows that platforms have now grown to a scale that makes the question of their public implications unescapable. The four

case studies concern sectors of activity that are not new to private entities (e.g. journalism or public transport), but that are at least minimally regulated with the public interest in mind. Platforms, hiding behind their technicality and purported status of intermediary, systematically dodge the question of their implication for the public good (mostly framed as variations of discourses about "making the world a better place"). Platforms have mastered with time their capacity to hide behind arguments such as offering competing prices to users (e.g. ride sharing companies are cheaper than taxi), the "empowerment" they bring (e.g. users taking control of their health data), or the wide accessibility they provide (e.g. anyone can take a course on a MOOC). However, these arguments fall short when counterbalanced by the systematic surveillance of users (e.g. students taking an online course), the lack of universal access to services (e.g. ride sharing companies and public transportation), or when they actively accelerate the decline of sectors (e.g. following newspapers' dependence on Facebook).

Gillespie similarly shows the dangers of letting corporate platforms regulate themselves. The chapter on the long controversy of breastfeeding mum groups on Facebook, almost as old as the social network, shows how clumsily and impulsively the platform changes its policy on this topic, reproducing existing stigmas (e.g. on breastfeeding in public space) instead of giving voice and empowering women, and reproducing mainstream commodification of women's body (deciding that breastfeeding is offensive, while letting hypersexualized groups exist on Facebook).

Both of these authors contribute to the discussion, at the core of this special issue, on the difficulties of differentiating between platforms and infrastructures. First, the authors work out the distinction by drawing attention to the technical architecture of platforms: the *infrastructural* platforms that van Dijck et al. describe allows other systems and apps to be built upon them. Gillespie similarly defines platforms as "built on an infrastructure, beneath that circulation of information, for processing data for customer service, advertising, and profit." (2018, p. 18). Second, they both use the term "infrastructure" to designate the scale that these platforms now take: for Gillespie, important questions emerge when platforms constitute a "powerful infrastructure for knowledge, participation, and public expression" (2018, p. 205); for van Dijck et al., an ecosystemic view on platforms show how their components are not independent, but taken altogether, constitute a global infrastructure. Beyond this use of the terms 'platforms' and 'infrastructures', both books also focus on the

technical infrastructure that runs these companies. The past few years have seen Facebook, Google and others developing their activity in various infrastructural sectors such as building and managing data centres, installing undersea cables, even providing internet connectivity. The recent case of the ban of the website Daily Stormer showed how questions about the responsibilities of platforms now also applies to the infrastructural level. After the website got banned from social media, it was the turn of the hosting services GoDaddy to drop them, followed by the content delivery network Cloudflare. As internet companies enter more and more deeply into the multiple layers of the internet infrastructure, similar questions of content moderation vs. neutral conduit are meant to apply more and more often.

Taken together, the two books offer a comprehensive view of both the functioning of platforms and their implications for public life. The strengths of the two monographs resides in the depth of their description of how platforms operate, how clearly they reveal the links between platforms and existing technologies, and in the case they make for taking seriously the centrality of platforms to core debates about social, cultural, and political life today. Indeed, both books provide a systemic view that shows the implications of platforms at a plurality of scales (at the levels of user, of the multiple sectors concerned, or of society at large). They show how the staggering scale of these platforms force them to constantly evolve, and yet they do so while managing to keep avoiding fundamental questions about their public role. Both books invite readers to think of platforms not as stand-alone apps, but in constant interaction with other objects (such as data and algorithms), practices (how users learn about moderation), and policies (how to reach a fairer platform society, how to think about content moderation), that all shapes how we use these platforms, and how they shape our lives.

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