



# BOOK REVIEW

## *The Platform Society*

José van Dijck, Thomas Poell & Martijn de Waal, 2018.

Reviewed by Tor Anders Bye

The Platform Society sets out to understand the role that many of the new digital platforms of our time have come to play in public life and societal organization, and how they have altered (or attempted to alter) social practices and institutions within the countries in which they operate. In the book's introductory paragraph, the authors – José van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martijn de Waal – point to terms like “the sharing economy”, “the platform revolution”, and “the gig economy” as attempts to describe the social change that have taken place over the past three decades alongside the transformation of the internet. It is an explicit ambition of the book to examine what role online platforms play in the organization of public values in both American and western European societies, as well as the issue of how public values can be forced upon the ecosystem that these platforms make up between them.

The authors formulate two overarching questions in the first chapter that serve as an outline on how to pursue their ambition; The main question driving their research is: “*What role do online platforms play in the organization of public values in American and European societies?*” In addition, they ask the more urgent question: “*Who is or should be responsible and accountable for governing a fair and democratic platform society?*” The book is divided into seven chapters, of which the first two attempt to outline the premise for their research and elaborate on the theoretical devices which they bring into this work, the next four explores a number of cases tied to four prominent domains of society (major News organizations, *Urban Transport, Healthcare and Health Research* in the public and private sectors, and various levels of *Education*), while the final chapter summarize their findings while attempting to formulate how this new platform society ought to be governed in a responsible fashion based on their research findings.

The overarching diagnostic provided by this book is both timely and necessary, given the longstanding complacency on the part of both the public and governing institutions to intercept the foothold that a number of the largest digital platforms have gained in the everyday lives of most citizens and consumers. In particular, chapter five examining the protection and circulation of medical data through so-called public-private partnerships should be of great interest to anyone concerned with the ability that major digital platforms and tech companies have in safeguarding

sensitive information about their users, as well as refraining from compromising this data in pursuit of enterprises allegedly championing the common good alongside for-profit motifs. The chapter opens with an account of the proposed partnership between a hospital tied to the British National Health Service (NHS) and Google's DeepMind project. Through this partnership, Google would be granted access to *all* NHS data of 1.6 million patients, encompassing both historical patient information as well as sensitive details tied to abortion, drug overdose, HIV status and pathology records.

While Google's DeepMind project did spark great controversy at its inception, they are far from alone in their attempt to challenge the established sociolegal order in various fields. With a burgeoning field of online health platforms ranging from personal fitness apps to health-and-sickness apps emerging, the global industry of health-related platforms is being stacked onto and interwoven with the infrastructural core of the platform ecosystem while an increasing number of public-private alliances become forged in lieu of chronic underfunding and dire need of resources. Grounding their analysis in digital platforms illustrative of this sectoral trend – 23andMe, PatientsLikeMe, and Parkinson mPower – van Dijck, Poell and de Waal argue that legislators worldwide need “to understand how healthcare and health research are increasingly governed by platform mechanisms that unsettle many current legal premises and undermine established paradigms” (p. 115-116), referencing the disruptive impact that digitization of personal health information and services have had in a number of western European countries in later years (the implementation of New Public Management in the health sector being at the forefront of this development). The health sector is, however, not the only one to be impacted by the coordinated implementation of web-based solutions across all sectors of western society, and a number of other sectors face similar discerning altercations as a result of digital platforms becoming ubiquitous in public life on a global scale.

At the forefront of this development are the five largest tech-companies in the world, also known as the “Big Five” (Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google and Microsoft). Given their critical role in our way of (re)organizing public life in a number of ways as part of the digital transformation to which modern society has



become subjected, it is well worth pausing to question the how's and why's of the Big Five's way to global dominion by way of superimposing their products and services on what is perhaps the largest and most diverse audience in human history: millions of individuals now purchase and sell physical products through Amazon.com or actively use the streaming service Amazon Prime, use Facebook to manage their social relations and organize their daily schedules (or even play games provided by third-party developers), and use the google search engine in almost every context (with the term "googling" having become ubiquitous). Most people also own one or multiple digital devices, provided either by Apple or Microsoft ranging from office-packages and software development tools to music- and video-streaming services. A number of other major platforms, such as Instagram, Youtube and Spotify have been consolidated by and incorporated into the vast number of products and services owned by at least one of these companies, in addition to China's so-called BAT-triumvirate (Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent).

In order to accommodate the original ambition of their book, van Dijck, Poell and de Waal draw on several case-studies of individual Apps and digital platforms anchored in concrete events and developments from all over the world within the past few years in order to create a taxonomy that identify how platforms work in specific contexts. It is their argument that a "functional taxonomy of platforms could be useful to help guide legislators in updating their regulatory frameworks," in addition to "help politicians and governments decide what responsibilities tech companies carry vis-à-vis their online services and products" (p. 19). As their contribution towards such a taxonomy, they explore the intricate methods through which platforms organize their content, namely *platform mechanisms*. Based on their observations, they argue that these mechanisms are articulated through three distinct processes that they have labelled "datafication", "commodification", and "selection". Datafication refers to how platforms tend to quantify many aspects of the world that have never been quantified before, commodification the process in which objects (both online and offline), activities, emotions and ideas are transformed into tradable commodities, and selection the way in which platforms steer user interaction through the selection (or curation) of content most relevant to them through moderation.

Albeit a rudimentary outline of the taxonomy proposed by the authors themselves, it does succeed in identifying some of the large-scale concerns that circumvent users on an individual level by turning to specific examples on how various societal sectors are being influenced by the Big Five tech companies (and the vast subset of digital platforms owned by these). For instance, at the start of chapter three, van Dijck, Poell and de Waal explore the events surrounding the Cambridge Analytica incident, in which Facebook were faced with allegations that their "trending" news section and lacking human editorial oversight in redistributing News content contributed to the outcome of the American presidential election of 2016. Major platform developers like Facebook platforms are given more or less free reign as to how

they structure their own digital platform(s) and on which terms their end users may come to enjoy them. Perhaps most notably in the case of News distribution, a wide variety of actors involved in both the production, circulation, and monetization of news content online have no choice but to use Facebook in order to interact with one another: thanks to Facebook's hegemonic status in content distribution, major news organizations are forced to develop new native and networked monetization strategies and organize the production and distribution of news content around platform data that outlines the metrics for its end users.

The authors' contention that digital platforms like Facebook and Google have gone too long without a modicum of public scrutiny is one that helps elevate the book towards a higher agency by arguing how companies like the Big Five may be forced to contribute towards maintaining public values in the societal sectors their platforms provide both products and services to, on both the local and national level. However, values such as *safety, privacy, transparency and accuracy* do not sufficiently express themselves through their infrastructural expressions within and across digital platforms, and must therefore be actively and consistently addressed by public institutions and individual citizens or civic collectives concerned with protecting the common good. They also point to the fact that "the American platform ecosystem comes with a specific set of norms and values inscribed in its architecture" (p. 27), grounded in ideologically explicit values that often remain implicit under said platform's architecture meets resistance in sectors and markets outside the United States (including Europe, in matters such as free speech and the right to public expression).

Platform owners and designers may claim to support and contribute towards such values in the name of the common good: For instance, as Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg formulates in his own manifesto: "In times like these, the most important thing we at Facebook can do is to develop the social infrastructure to give people the power to build a global community that works for all of us" (p. 29). And yet, Facebook – like many corporately owned and operated platforms – are governed by a professional organization riddled with internal paradoxes, as pointed out by van Dijck, Poell and de Waal: while platforms tend to appear both egalitarian, to be of public value, ideologically neutral and agnostic, as well as locally oriented, they are in fact hierarchical, almost entirely corporate, heavily ideological and political in their architecture, as well as heavily oriented towards the global level. They also appear to replace "top-down" and "big government" with "bottom-up" and "customer empowerment" but does so by means of a highly centralized structure which remains opaque to its users (p. 23). If left unchecked, these platforms may continue to superimpose their products and services – and thus the architectural ideologies and politics imbued within these – on various sectors in whom they do not necessarily share an interest in protecting on an individual level. In addition, they are rarely (if ever) subject to collective agreements that protect the best interest(s) of citizens, sufficiently ensure their users' access to their



own goods and services regardless of geographical location or life situation, and – perhaps most notably – these platforms remain largely exempt from local and intranational taxation policies that similar, competing service providers and legacy companies are forced to adhere to.

The authors' conclude that a connective world "requires a profound rethinking of the world's online ecosystems along with the political and legal infrastructures through which they acquire legitimacy" (p. 163). As a growing number of both public institutions and individual citizens and consumers utilize the products and services provided by one or more major

tech-companies, private actors and third-party developers, both local, regional, and (even inter)national governing bodies become entitled to greater discretion with regards to how their judicial restrictions and sociolegal mandate have come to be compromised by the emergence of new digital platforms. To the end, the authors remain quite adamant that the continued expansion and cementation of this platform society is a development that should not go unaddressed, as is reflected at the end of the first chapter: "Platforms are too important to leave their regulation to self-labeled operators and users; civil society, citizens, and governments have big stakes in a fair, democratic, and responsible platform society" (p. 30).

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