

BUY NOW

**How Amazon
Branded
Convenience
and Normalized
Monopoly**

Emily West

BUY NOW

Distribution Matters Series

Edited by Joshua Braun and Ramon Lobato

The Distribution Matters series publishes original scholarship on the social impact of media distribution networks. Drawing widely from the fields of communication history, cultural studies, and media industry studies, books in this series ask questions about how and why distribution matters to civic life and popular culture.

Emily West, *Buy Now: How Amazon Branded Convenience and Normalized Monopoly*

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**HOW AMAZON BRANDED CONVENIENCE
AND NORMALIZED MONOPOLY**

EMILY WEST

THE MIT PRESS CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS LONDON, ENGLAND

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The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Avenir by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: West, Emily, author.

Title: Buy now : how Amazon branded convenience and normalized monopoly / Emily West.

Description: Cambridge : The MIT Press, [2022] | Series: Distribution matters | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021014621 | ISBN 9780262543309 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Amazon.com (Firm) | Electronic commerce. | Retail trade.

Classification: LCC HF5548.32 .W466 2022 | DDC 381/.14206573—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021014621>

In memory of my grandfather, Selwyn John, who loved to go to the shops.

CONTENTS

FIGURE LIST ix

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS xi

INTRODUCTION: BUY NOW—THE BRANDING
OF CONVENIENCE 1

I DISTRIBUTION 27

1 A NEW KIND OF DISTRIBUTION BRAND 29

2 THE BOX: DISTRIBUTION FETISHISM AND THE MATERIALITIES
OF ECOMMERCE 51

II CULTURE 81

3 FROM BOOKSELLER TO BEHEMOTH: THE PLATFORMIZATION
OF RETAIL 83

4 SPEAK FOR SERVICE: ALEXA, SURVEILLANCE,
AND AUTOMATED INTIMACY 107

5 WATCH NOW: UBIQUITOUS MEDIA AND THE
COMMODITIZATION OF CULTURE 139

III IMAGE 169

6 AMAZON.AMAZON: NORMALIZING MONOPOLY 171

7 AMERICAN UBIQUITY: AMAZON'S PLATFORM
IMPERIALISM 195

CONCLUSION: CONFRONTING THE COSTS
OF CONVENIENCE 219

NOTES 237
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY 287
INDEX 301

FIGURE LIST

- 0.1** Amazon logo since 2000. 20
- 1.1** Walmart’s productivity loop and Amazon’s flywheel of growth. 35
- 2.1** *Danbo*, photograph by Ravi Shah, 2015. 52
- 2.2** Smartphone push alerts from Amazon for a delivery. 62
- 2.3** Instagram-ready photo of the author taken by the automatic photo booth at the YYZ4 Fulfillment Center in Brampton, Ontario. 68
- 2.4** Author screenshot, February 2021, demonstrating the different shipping options for a Prime member, including “FREE Amazon Day Delivery” and a small digital credit as an incentive for picking “No-Rush” shipping. 77
- 3.1** Author screenshot from Amazon.com (November 28, 2019) shows “trending” electronics with their prices and customer ratings. 92
- 3.2** Author screenshot of Amazon Charts with explanation of Most Sold versus Most Read charts, available for both fiction and nonfiction. 98
- 3.3** A sign in Amazon Books in Dedham, Massachusetts, teaching shoppers how to “Check prices in this store.” A book with the label featuring a review and number of stars, but no price, in Amazon Books on 34th St. in New York City. 103

- 3.4** The spacing of fiction selections by Elena Ferrante at Amazon Books in Dedham, Massachusetts. 104
- 4.1** Screenshot by author from the *Alexa Design Guide: Be Available*. 135
- 5.1** *Amazon Echo at Whole Foods*, photograph by Phillip Pessar, used with permission. 140
- 5.2** Packing tape advertising services bundled with Prime. 143
- 5.3** Main reason for having an Amazon Prime membership. 151
- 5.4** X-Ray view of episode 1, season 2 of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. 153
- 5.5** Promotional image for *Making the Cut* (2020). 157
- 6.1** *The Spheres*, photograph by Brent Bereska, used with permission. 187
- 7.1** Promotional image for *The Grand Tour*. 202
- 7.2** “Floaty”—Amazon 30-second spot from TBWA Sydney. 203
- 7.3** Author screenshot from the ad for Amazon’s Great Indian Festival, October 10–15, 2018. 204
- 8.1** December 2019 cover of *Wired* magazine featuring labor activist Nimo Omar, cofounder of the Awood Center that helps East African workers organize. 220
- 8.2** “People opposed to Amazon’s plan to locate a headquarters in New York City hold a protest inside of an Amazon book store on 34th. St. on November 26, 2018 in New York City.” 230
- 8.3** Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler, “Anatomy of an AI System,” 2018. 234

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank the many people and institutions who encouraged and supported me in this project. The seeds of this book are in an International Communication Association pre-conference in 2017 called Distribution Matters, organized by Joshua Braun, Ramon Lobato, and Amanda Lotz. This inspiring one-day event encouraged me to pursue this project, which ended up in the MIT Press book series Distribution Matters coedited by Josh Braun and Ramon Lobato. It's not an exaggeration to say that there would be no Amazon book, at least not by me, without their expertise, professionalism, and care. Thank you to Gita Devi Manaktala and Justin Kehoe at the MIT Press who between them have shepherded this book to the finish line, with the right balance of patience and deadline setting during the challenges of 2020–2021, and the anonymous reviewers for their expert feedback on the manuscript.

Conferences and workshops have been a key way for me to stay focused on this project, be inspired and informed by other scholars' work, and get much needed encouragement and energy from others' responses. In particular I'd like to thank danah boyd for her invitation to the Environmental Impacts of Data-Driven Technologies Workshop at Data & Society, Candace Roberts and Myles Ethan Lascity who organized the Consumer Identities & Social Change Symposium at St. John's University, and Richard R. John for welcoming me to a roundtable on communications and globalization at the World Economic History Forum.

Two of this book's chapters draw from previous publications, and I extend thanks to those who gave permission to partially reprint that material here. Chapter 3 appears in part in a volume coedited by Daniel Herbert and Derek Johnson, *Point of Sale: Analyzing Media Retail* (2019), published by Rutgers University Press. Chapter 4 builds on an earlier piece published in 2019 in a special issue of *Surveillance & Society* focused on platform surveillance, coedited by David Murakami Wood and Torin Monahan.

My academic home in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, housing my tremendous colleagues and engaged graduate students, has been an ideal environment for pursuing this work. I'm grateful to current and former chairs Erica Scharrer, Sut Jhally, and Mari Castañeda for helping protect my research time at crucial moments.

Outside of formal institutional support I'm very fortunate to have a deep bench of mentors/colleagues/friends who have encouraged and advised me at key moments, including Lynn Comella, Laura Grindstaff, Lisa Henderson, Carolyn Marvin, Matt McAllister, Amy Schalet, Katherine Sender, Claire Wardle, and Louise Woodstock. Special thanks go to Ryan Olbrysh for his assistance with the book cover. Through a virtual writing accountability group generously organized by Josh Braun, I've also received advice and weekly encouragement from wonderful colleagues in digital media and technology studies.

Thank you to my family in Canada for supporting me and showing great patience in what no doubt has seemed an extremely slow process from idea to book. Special thanks to my father, Richard P. West, who has far surpassed me in book publishing during this period as well as educated me about the world of self-publishing on Amazon. Thank you to our wonderful Valley friends for promoting joy and balance amidst work and responsibilities, especially during the pandemic times. And to my husband, Kevin, and children, Gryffith and Ivar, thank you for your unconditional love, enthusiastic encouragement, practical support, and letting me monopolize the "office/music room" in order to finish this book.

INTRODUCTION: BUY NOW—THE BRANDING OF CONVENIENCE

In August 2015, I found myself transfixed by a *New York Times* article that appeared on my smartphone: “Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace.”¹ Detailing the harsh workplace conditions at Amazon headquarters in Seattle that housed programmers and other white-collar employees, as well as reviewing existing reports of abuses in Amazon’s warehouses, the article revealed disturbing allegations about the human costs being extracted in order to provide a fast, seamless, inexpensive, and convenient consumer experience. As a longtime Amazon customer (since 2000, my online account informed me), I was suddenly and painfully aware of my own complicity in supporting these workplace practices through my purchases, and perhaps, even by my behavioral responses to Amazon over the years. How many times had I discussed a product with a friend, and punctuated the conversation with “you can get it on Amazon.” “It’s probably on Amazon.” “Check Amazon.” Baby gear, jewelry display stands, left-handed spatulas, replacements for lost AC adaptors, and oh yes, books, can all be found on Amazon, ordered within seconds, and received often within a day or two.

My first encounters with the company were in my final year of my university studies, searching for books on what was at the time the new Amazon.com website. I wasn’t yet able to purchase them, at least not for a reasonable shipping fee, because I lived in Canada, and Amazon .ca had not yet been established. Even then, I found the way Amazon (as

it now prefers to be called, and as most people refer to it) functioned as a digital library useful for discovering or learning more about resources for school projects, some of which I could then track down from other bookstores or libraries. An avid reader from a young age, the online bookstore was my favorite corner of the young internet, which I mostly accessed via a painfully slow dial-up connection. As I thought about what kind of work to pursue after graduation, I looked into employment with Amazon—combining my love of books with involvement in the emerging digital economy seemed like a dream job—but my citizenship would be an obstacle. A few years later, having moved to the United States for graduate school, I finally summoned the courage to put my credit card information online in order to start buying books from Amazon. About ten years later I was in Seattle, attending a workshop for expectant parents, and a fellow parent who was an Amazon employee told everyone about a new “Amazon Mom” program—free two-day shipping in exchange for sharing the date of your impending birth with the company. I signed up. Baby gear from Amazon started to arrive. I even registered for the baby shower on Amazon. That was the gateway for using Amazon not just for books anymore, but all manner of household items, some of which I purchased using the “Subscribe & Save” feature. I eventually became a Prime customer in order to access the Prime Video content as well as the free two-day shipping no matter the size of my order. When I finally gave some conscious thought to my relationship with the ecommerce giant, prompted by the investigative reporting by Jodi Kantor and David Streitfeld, I realized that incrementally Amazon had become a regular habit for me; I had certainly spent thousands of dollars at the retailer over the years. Like other Amazon customers, including many who commented on the *New York Times* article, I stopped buying from the company. Then Christmas came.

The story of my own entanglement with Amazon is far from unique. In twenty-five years, Amazon has transformed from an ecommerce upstart, puzzling through how to overcome Americans’ hesitation to buy things online, to a brand that many people in the United States and beyond interact with on a daily basis. From streaming Amazon Prime Video via a Fire TV stick, to reading books on an Amazon Kindle, to interacting with Alexa on an Amazon Echo, to receiving smartphone updates about the progress of the latest Amazon order, Amazon and its sub-brands have inserted

themselves into our daily lives. This doesn't even consider Amazon's role in providing key digital infrastructure to ecommerce, streaming media, and businesses of all kinds via its cloud computing arm Amazon Web Services. Amazon's growth and expansion into new businesses have been so steady that its market dominance and ubiquity have somewhat snuck up on our collective consciousness, just as my own dependence on Amazon snuck up on me. It's almost hard to remember a time pre-Amazon, despite the fact that the company was formed in 1994, not long after the internet became open to commercial activity, famously run at first out of Jeff Bezos's garage in Bellevue, Washington, and launched in 1995.

Buy Now is about our relationship with Amazon—how this brand grew so quickly by obsessing over our consumer experience, and attained a level of ubiquity in our lives while hiding in plain sight. By offering in-depth accounts of Amazon's major consumer-facing services including its focus on fast and seamless ecommerce delivery, streaming media, book retailing, and AI voice-enabled smart speakers, this book offers a cultural study of bigness in today's economy. I present Amazon's market dominance and our increasing dependence on its convenient services in relation to the resulting costs—on product sellers, market diversity, labor, and the environment, and on our own power as consumers. In this book I explain how Amazon's branding practices and the nature of its services cultivate personalized, intimate relationships with consumers that normalize its outsized influence on ourselves and our communities.

Especially for Americans, Amazon has become ubiquitous—a mundane part of our symbolic and material environment, in addition to being an often unseen source of infrastructure for our digital worlds. Journalist Franklin Foer argues, "We've never seen a company that's become so integrated into existence. At a certain point, it becomes unavoidable."² Amazon's very ubiquity and everydayness can cause it to fade into the background, too often evading consideration of what its rise has meant for how we access media, learn about and acquire consumer goods, read books, listen to music, and access information online—all this, despite the fact that Amazon is undeniably big. It's one of the most market-capitalized companies in the world, founded by the richest person in the world, the biggest online retailer (by far) in America, the biggest seller of cloud computing services in the world, the biggest seller of books and ebooks in the

United States, and the biggest seller of smart speakers. Amazon is very big in multiple respects, but prefers that we don't notice.

Political economist of communication Vincent Mosco warns against the tendency to allow digital communication, and the companies that facilitate it, to become invisible in their ubiquity. Just as the material objects that make digital communication possible—the cables, wires, and large devices such as desktop computers—disappear from everyday view, so does digital become more embedded in everyday life, and in so doing, grow more powerful. Mosco draws an analogy with the early days of electricity, which similarly became more infrastructural just as its network of wires started to disappear behind walls: “We once viewed electricity outside ourselves, embodied in very material technologies obviously external to people who used them.” Similarly, he writes, while “not quite ubiquitous, computers are nevertheless increasingly embedded in so many devices and bodies, including our own, that they appear to be everywhere, yet nowhere in particular.”³ This trend has been identified as a move toward “ubiquitous computing,” most fully realized by the Internet of Things (IoT).⁴

Just as the technologies of digital communication become ubiquitous and fade into the woodwork, so do the tech brands—Google, Facebook, Apple, and Amazon—that bring them to us. These platform giants blend into our homes and lives when we access them through ever-smaller devices, or merely through voice, as people now do with speakers such as the Amazon Echo, Google Home, or Apple HomePod that are designed to blend into home décor. And the giant most likely to be in the living room is Amazon, with its leading digital voice assistant, major investments in Internet of Things technologies, and natural advantage as the dominant ecommerce site selling objects for the home.

I approach the normalization, even the banality of Amazon's ubiquity not as something to take for granted, but as an industrial and cultural accomplishment that requires explanation, theorization, and critique. This book is an effort to make this ubiquity—which tends toward invisibility very much by design—visible, thereby making it more available to challenge and critique. It offers a cultural study of corporate bigness and ubiquity, and an investigation of how the rise of such a large company laser-focused on serving the consumer with convenience is shifting what it means to be a consumer, and beyond that, the self.

Why focus on Amazon? Other tech giants like Facebook and Google have achieved similar levels of everyday usage for millions, if not billions, of people worldwide. Facebook, Google, and Netflix have enjoyed rapid ascent to ubiquity and achieved unprecedented power in our information environment.⁵ Facebook has risen from a dorm room dream to a massive economic and cultural force quicker than Amazon. And Google has perhaps an even greater claim on everyday ubiquity, as it undergoes “genericide”—when a specific brand name starts to be used in the language as a generic term for something, in this case to “google” as the widely used term for “doing an internet search.” However, Amazon thus far has eluded the extensive scholarly critique these other companies have received. The auction-based ecommerce site eBay likewise has inspired in-depth scholarly treatment, notably in Michele White’s *Buy It Now*, named after that all-important button on that site.⁶ In comparison, scholarly consideration of Amazon as a key player in the digital economy and, by extension, our culture may have lagged because Amazon’s primary association with something as prosaic as retail—and even more quaint, its origins in bookselling—arguably insulate it from being taken as seriously as it should be.

However, popular and press investigation of Amazon has burst on the scene in recent years, with the Kantor and Streitfeld article heralding a turn to greater journalistic scrutiny, Jason Del Ray’s *Vox* Land of the Giants podcast (2019) digging in depth into different parts of Amazon’s business model, and James Jacoby’s *Frontline* episode “Amazon Empire” (2020) consolidating many of the critiques of the tech giant among journalists and activists. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Amazon’s infrastructural pervasiveness has achieved greater social recognition. Seemingly overnight, people all over the world discovered that the people who worked in retail distribution systems were “essential,” although their level of pay and rights in the workplace might suggest otherwise. Online shopping was no longer just a convenience but in fact a necessity for some people, while for most, getting things delivered made sheltering in place more feasible and tolerable. Markets formerly resistant to Amazon’s charms, notably American seniors who had yet to adopt online shopping habits, and Italians, for whom going to shops had been an important part of the culture, and cash their preferred form of payment, were suddenly won over.⁷ Amazon’s streaming media services

similarly played a greater role in people's lives, as libraries, bookstores, and movie theaters closed, and new programming on television dried up. As warehouse workers in particular were required to continue going to work, under the greatest pressure ever to fulfill customer orders, Amazon's role as one of the country's largest employers and the way that it consistently seemed to prioritize the delight and satisfaction of its customers over the well-being of its workers came to sustained national attention in the United States. As Amazon made a public stand in June 2020 in support of the Black Lives Matter protests taking place all over the United States and beyond, it also announced a one-year moratorium on selling its controversial facial recognition technology (called Rekognition) to law enforcement, thereby making a rare connection between the values of its consumer-facing activities and its business-to-business activities.

As Amazon has developed into much more than an online book retailer, the lack of clarity and even knowledge of what kind of company Amazon is has also helped it fall under the radar. Ontological uncertainty about the very nature of Amazon and its business isn't limited to observers or average consumers—it's a theme that emerges in commentary about Amazon from its very core, including founder and longtime CEO Jeff Bezos, who has grappled with what Amazon actually is since its earliest days. As Bezos tried to explain what kind of company Amazon was in 1999, he said that it wasn't a business that sold things so much as a business focused on "helping people make purchase decisions. . . . The closest thing that I can come to is that we're not trying to be a book company or trying to be a music company—we're trying to be a customer company."⁸

As implied by this comment, Amazon's business activities and core competencies are a rapidly moving target. However, the idea that Amazon is a platform business, a particular expression of digital capitalism, offers some explanation for how and why one company can move so rapidly into new business areas, and not just grow into them, but soon dominate them. This book is about a company called Amazon and how it persuades consumers to welcome it into almost every corner of their lives. On another level, it's about what it looks like and feels like to be a consumer in platform capitalism.

DISTRIBUTION MATTERS

For many years, it was tempting to overlook Amazon as a tech giant because of its association with retail rather than media, information, or computing. Similarly, for too long the economic and cultural importance of digital distribution companies like Facebook, Google, and YouTube (a subsidiary of Google that in turn resides within Alphabet) were underestimated. After all, these companies didn't produce their own content, and wasn't it really the messages that mattered? In recent years that misapprehension has been corrected, with scholars, activists, and eventually, politicians raising the alarm bells about how new regimes of digital distribution have disrupted long-standing economic and cultural norms in news, politics, and entertainment.

While it's clear that disrupting the distribution of news is of prime importance for politics and the public sphere, it may have been less obvious why we should care about online shopping. However, retail is a key stage in the distribution of cultural and informational goods, including books, which was Amazon's first product category, but also music, movies, and television. While production and consumption have typically received the bulk of attention in media studies scholarship, the ways that digital has upended dominant paradigms of media distribution has inspired renewed interest in media distribution among critics and scholars.⁹ Related to this development, recent scholarship draws attention to the cultural significance of retail as a key aspect of media distribution, not coincidentally as our retail environment—especially in terms of brick-and-mortar enterprises—is being transformed precisely because of the explosion in ecommerce led by Amazon.¹⁰

Shopping has long been trivialized due to its association with feminine domesticity, consumption rather than production, and the pursuit of meaningless, fleeting pleasure. Although shopping and retail might conjure the realm of the frivolous and extraneous, in fact the vast majority of shopping we do involves the routine provisioning that keeps households and lives running.¹¹ Amazon has steadily moved into these household categories of consumption, including groceries, as with its 2017 acquisition of the Whole Foods grocery chain.

As a scholar of consumer culture, my interest in Amazon is because of, not despite, its association with retail and shopping. Consumer identities

are socially and politically consequential; the ways that ecommerce and digital technologies reshape consumer identities matter. Rightly or wrongly, the things that we buy are important resources in how we construct and communicate identities and make everyday culture. Retail spaces have long been prominent, if not the dominant, public spaces where people encounter each other, either directly, or through the products that other people are buying. Retail has also shaped our communities, via both infrastructure and employment.

The social and cultural value of retail spaces and employment became more noticeable as they were taken away with widespread lockdowns in 2020. Online shopping became not just an option but a seeming necessity, at the same time that the conditions and dangers of the warehouse and delivery jobs became much more of a consideration as consumers navigated decisions about what to buy, from whom, and with what modalities. As Paul N. Edwards explains, infrastructure is what remains invisible to most people until it stops working, and that was certainly the case during the pandemic shut downs, with longer shipping times and lack of availability for certain products drawing consumer attention to the supply chains and labor enabling the distribution of so many goods.¹²

In recent years, the sheer speed with which Amazon has entered and then succeeded in, or even come to dominate new businesses has not escaped the attention of business analysts, legal scholars, and legislators. Amazon's business expansions have attracted substantial press attention and awareness among the public, including the aforementioned purchase of Whole Foods Market in 2017, Amazon's launch of its own streaming channel and production company that competes with Netflix, its invitation to North American cities to compete to be the second Amazon headquarters, its testing of drone deliveries, its consumer electronics including the Kindle, Fire TVs and Fire Tablets, Echo smart speakers, and Alexa, the AI digital assistant.

Other business expansions may be less well known among the general public, but are no less noteworthy in terms of understanding Amazon's market dominance: Amazon Marketplace and Fulfillment by Amazon—services for third-party sellers; the development of Amazon Web Services, a company that provides cloud-based data storage and software services to millions of companies, including big players in digital media like

Netflix and Comcast and government agencies like the Central Intelligence Agency; its purchase of Kiva, a robotics firm, and its subsequent rollout of robotic technologies in its fulfillment centers; growth in its logistics, shipping, and delivery services; and Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing platform on which people do digital piecework.¹³

In addition to these discrete businesses, the data analytics side of Amazon—the ways it collects data about customers and transactions that are then fed into “models, analytics, and algorithms” for both its own purposes and to sell information products to third parties—is key to the company’s success and ability to grow into new businesses, but is far from transparent to the average consumer.¹⁴ In sum, while Amazon began as simply an online retailer, and remains that in many of our minds, in fact it is a type of business that is coming to define the digital economy—a platform.

PLATFORMS IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

Essential to the digital economy, platforms are often defined, including by theorist of platform capitalism Nick Srnicek, as digital intermediaries.¹⁵ The term “platform” evokes a foundation—some kind of digital space or software capability—that allows different stakeholders (consumers and sellers, users and advertisers, companies and gig workers) to interact. Amazon is a platform company in this sense. More than half of the goods the company sells are through the Amazon Marketplace and Fulfillment by Amazon (FBA) programs, the former where sellers use the site to sell their goods but take care of the delivery themselves, and the latter where sellers also pay Amazon to warehouse their goods and arrange their delivery. Amazon is also a retailer in its own right, meaning it stocks product and increasingly produces items, such as personal electronics, fashion, and beauty products, under its own labels. This distinguishes it from ecommerce sites that are pure platform, such as eBay, Etsy, and Chinese ecommerce giant Alibaba.

Allowing other sellers—often selling at cheaper price points—to use its retail platform to reach consumers might seem counterintuitive. However, the more product choices that are on Amazon, the more consumers will visit it, which creates network effects. Network effects refer to a success-breeds-success dynamic that has been particularly pronounced

for the GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft) tech giants: the scale of the company is part of the value proposition for users. As more products are available on Amazon, more consumers use the site to shop, and as more consumers use the site, more sellers want to sell there. Thanks to network effects, platform companies that arrive first or achieve early momentum have a tendency toward tremendous market dominance, sometimes approaching or achieving monopoly status.¹⁶

Amazon reportedly understood from its earliest days the value of being the middle man. Business journalist Brad Stone locates Amazon's first efforts to "become a platform and augment the e-commerce efforts of other retailers" to 1997 when it launched its first effort at an eBay-like service with Amazon Auctions.¹⁷ In 1998, one of the newly public Amazon's first acquisitions was an online shopping comparison company called Junglee from which it developed its own shopping comparison site, Amazon's "Shop the Web." Even though the service would allow shoppers to see if a product was being sold cheaper somewhere other than Amazon, Amazon still received a commission on delivering that customer through the service, and built the brand equity of being a trusted destination for online shopping. These early attempts at being an ecommerce platform morphed into today's Amazon Marketplace and Fulfillment by Amazon services, through which Amazon collects a cut of every transaction that occurs thanks to bringing buyers and sellers together, a revenue stream yielding higher margins than selling its own products, and growing all the time as Amazon extracts higher commissions from and charges ever more fees to its sellers.¹⁸ As one of Amazon's first chroniclers, Robert Spector, put it, "Amazon.com made it obvious that it intended to be *the* commerce portal of the World Wide Web."¹⁹

The term "platform" is also understood in the digital economy as hardware, software, or a service upon which other companies can build their own products and services, typically via APIs, or application programming interfaces. As Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost define platforms, they are "the underlying computer systems" that "enable, constrain, shape, and support the creative work that is done on them."²⁰ Developers can build games for people to play on Facebook, third parties can integrate Google Maps into their own websites and services, and companies can create Alexa "skills"

so consumers can access their services via voice. Amazon runs multiple platforms upon which third parties can develop their own products and services, including its retail site, Alexa, the Amazon App Store, and Kindle Direct Publishing.

In turning Amazon into a platform company, Bezos was reportedly influenced by internet thought leader Tim O'Reilly, who met with the CEO in 2002 to convince him of the wisdom of platformizing the Amazon site by providing APIs to sales data that other companies, such as book publishers, could use to track trends.²¹ Opening up the Amazon site to developers in addition to consumers and sellers started Amazon on the path toward conceptualizing their internal computer storage and software capacities as services for third parties, culminating in what is today Amazon Web Services, the first-to-market cloud computing service at its official launch in 2006 and continued leader, estimated to control 32 percent of the global market in 2020.²² AWS, as it is commonly known, is one of Amazon's primary platform businesses, and its most profitable to boot. In fact, Amazon's cloud computing arm is largely responsible for the company's overall profitability—accounting for more than half of its profit in the fourth quarter of 2020, for example—allowing the company to subsidize other parts of its business that are losing money or still growing.²³

The customers for Amazon Web Services are businesses and organizations. Since AWS is not consumer-facing, it does not get in-depth treatment in this book despite how significant it is to both Amazon and the business community. Just as the average computer user has gradually moved their data storage and software from their hard drives to the cloud, so have businesses. AWS's cloud computing services allow businesses to, essentially, rent data storage, computing power, database infrastructure, software services, and data analytics from Amazon on an as-needed basis. This arrangement gives businesses the flexibility to grow or shrink their usage as needed, and avoid the outlay of overhead and fixed costs on IT infrastructure and staff. While Amazon offers dozens of its own AWS services, it also allows other companies to produce their own services that sit "on top of" AWS, known as "AWS Partners," as well as "Independent Software Vendors" who have adapted their software to work with AWS.²⁴ In this formulation, it's the programmability of the service, and therefore

the ability of the user to customize it for their own uses that make it a platform.²⁵

AWS is used by government agencies, large companies, and more than a million small and medium-sized businesses and startups. It's the platform of platforms, in the sense that it provides the cloud-based computing infrastructure for Amazon's own services, as well as for numerous other platform businesses, including Lyft, Expedia, Slack, and Zoom, as well as more conventional companies like McDonald's and General Electric. Its importance to Amazon became clearer than ever when its CEO Andy Jassy was named Jeff Bezos's successor when Bezos stepped down as CEO of the whole company in 2021. Similar to so many infrastructures, but especially digital ones, Amazon's cloud services are an aspect of its ubiquity far beyond the average consumer's ken.

A third insight about platforms in the digital economy is that their primary business, even with appearances to the contrary, is extracting and processing data.²⁶ Market dominance has always meant the ability to shape market conditions in order to defeat competitors, through the benefits of economies of scale, or keeping prices artificially low. However, in the digital economy the ability to collect data about all your users and use that data not only to make your own business activities more competitive, but also to sell either the data itself, or products and services informed by that data, to third parties is a tremendously powerful and self-perpetuating advantage. Amazon collects huge amounts of data about consumer behavior that it can use to create predictive models and algorithms that make its products and services ever more irresistible to consumers. As I'll discuss in this book, the breadth and detail in the data that Amazon collects from consumers has been key to much of its growth and success, while the drive to collect an ever-greater variety and amount of data about us informs the design of many of Amazon's products and services.

In sum, Amazon is a platform in all three senses of the term: it's an intermediary, its platform businesses provide digital infrastructures upon which third parties build products and services, and its business is profoundly shaped by the data commodities resulting from its intermediary position. There is a politics to the term "platform," as Tarleton Gillespie has argued, particularly in how it obscures the extractive, structuring, and enclosing nature of many platforms in favor of the image of a neutral

and open foundation.²⁷ Platform companies like to present themselves as “merely the platform” that facilitates others’ innovations and accomplishments. Today, platform companies like Amazon are among the most valuable (as measured by market capitalization) in the world, and are the brands that people spend the most time with, and report the greatest appreciation for.

BRANDS IN PLATFORM CAPITALISM

There is no small slippage in how the term “platform” is used.²⁸ In addition to definitions focused on the technical qualities of digital platforms, brands themselves have been conceptualized as platforms,²⁹ a “figurative” usage according to Gillespie’s typology for the term.³⁰ In this book, I approach Amazon primarily as a brand, and use the case of Amazon to examine how brands are changing with the rapid growth of digital technologies and the rise of platforms. While focusing on distribution infrastructures exposes the structural foundations of Amazon’s market dominance, looking at platforms through the lens of branding draws our attention to the cultural and symbolic determinants of its ubiquity. The way a platform brand like Amazon has normalized its own ubiquity should be viewed as an accomplishment borne of branding, public relations, and relationship marketing.

Why foreground Amazon as a brand, rather than how it is organized technically, from a business perspective, or how it functions within current law and regulation? While I will consider all these aspects of Amazon throughout this book, I privilege branding for a few reasons. First of all, centering the brand trains our focus on the *relation* between the company and the public, and the ways in which that relation is made *meaningful*. A brand is the symbolic aspect of a business that consumers interact with and relate to; it is the “face” of the company, be that in literal terms—such as with the Quaker of Quaker Oats, or more figuratively—as the identity with which consumers cultivate a parasocial relationship. As Sarah Banet-Weiser puts it, a brand is “typically understood as the cultural and emotional domain of a product, or the cultural expression of a company or corporation.”³¹ Approaching Amazon as a brand draws our attention to consumer experience, affect, and meaning. It is only through consumer use, motivations, and meanings that companies flourish. As

brand theorist Adam Arvidsson argues, brands depend on the immaterial labor of consumers and users who complete and perpetuate brand meanings through their consumption and communication.³²

Ubiquity is a goal for all brands. As Arvidsson puts it,

For the big brands, with a lot of resources at their disposal, the ideal is ubiquity: To make the brand part of the biopolitical environment of life itself, no different from water and electricity, and to thus make life in all its walks contribute to its continuous and dynamic reproduction. As Ira Herbert, former marketing director for the Coca-Cola Company, described this strategy: “the ideal outcome . . . is for consumers to see Coca Cola as woven into their local context, an integral part of their everyday world.”³³

But for most brands, especially those linked to particular products, like Coca-Cola, ubiquity will remain aspiration rather than reality. In contrast, digital platform brands like Amazon can achieve ubiquity in people’s lives to an unprecedented extent.

It’s well established that the consumer product and services brands that dominated brand value and brand affection metrics in the 1990s—brands like Coke, Nike, and McDonald’s—succeeded in large part because they sold not just stuff that people liked, but lifestyles. To be somewhat reductive, Coke sells Americanness, Nike sells athleticism, and McDonald’s sells family. The strength of these brands is that they can inspire consumers with ideas, emotions, and aspirational lifestyles rather than merely touting their product features. There’s always something slightly new to say in advertising and promotional materials about the brand’s meaning, which gives these brands new materials for their marketing campaigns, and consumers new reasons to pay attention. The drawback is that no brand image or lifestyle can encompass absolutely everyone. Coke’s emphasis on classic American fun opens the door for Pepsi to claim youth and irreverence. Nike’s brand story about striving through sports allows a brand like Adidas to distinguish itself by offering street-ready athletic fashion. McDonald’s family-friendly vibe makes space for Burger King to siphon off irreverent young men, the most loyal customers for fast food.

Counter to what seemed like the zenith of brand culture in the late twentieth century, when every brand had its tribe and the consumer market could be sliced and diced finer and finer, tech brands that benefit from network effects follow different brand logics. Distribution brands

like Amazon, eBay, Facebook, and Google don't set out to have a market segment; they aim to capture everyone. Amazon in particular wants to be the "everything" brand for "everyone." To do so, it avoids telling a brand story specific enough to bring to mind a certain kind of consumer. Anna Weiner argues in the *New Yorker* that even compared to other tech giants, who "promote idealistic, utopian, or progressive narratives about community or connection," Amazon "strives, almost always, to present itself as a kind of infrastructure."³⁴ By *not* cultivating an elaborated brand image (other than the instantly recognizable logos) or offering itself as a lifestyle brand, Amazon avoids the semiotic specificity that would open up space for other brands to plant a flag on unclaimed semiotic, and therefore, demographic territory. The understated touch that Amazon uses in its branding and advertising is not an accident, as it seeks to be an innocuous, mutable brand that achieves maximum familiarity with minimum identity. Amazon is a fragmented, relational brand. Its meaning need not be as coherent, stable, or representational as brands traditionally have been. Customizing experiences for individuals is what allows brands like Amazon, Facebook, and Google to be brands of ubiquity, rather than the traditional brands of distinction. Using another conceptualization, many of these tech giants are "service brands," emphasizing a service or overall experience that they provide rather than a specific product or image.³⁵ For Amazon, that service is defined by the convenience and ease of the consumer.

Platform brands that provide services, like Amazon, are ideally suited to marketing and relationship building with consumers in the digital age. Today, product brand marketers are trying to emulate the success of the Amazons of the world by shifting from traditional marketing logics, wherein you create an eye-catching, memorable, emotional campaign and promote it largely through television spot advertising, to digital-era marketing logic, wherein you approach people not as potential buyers, but as users.³⁶ In this logic, rather than focusing on the brand's image or story, you focus on an experience or benefit you can provide your user, also known as relationship marketing.³⁷ You don't necessarily invest all your marketing dollars up front to get that initial purchase; you also focus on optimizing the service experience during and after the purchase. Based on their survey research with 5,000 consumers, business researchers Mark Bonchek and Vivek Bapat summarize the distinction: a traditional

brand is “a brand that people look up to” whereas a newcomer brand like Amazon is a brand that “makes my life easier.”³⁸ While the Cokes and Nikes of the world have long focused on positioning the brand in people’s minds, tech brands typically focus on positioning their brand in people’s lives. Bonchek and Bapat found measurable benefits for “usage brands” over “purchase brands”: “Survey respondents show more loyalty to usage brands. They had stronger advocacy in the form of spontaneous recommendations to others. And they showed a higher preference for usage brands over competitors, not just in making the purchase but in a willingness to pay a premium in price.”³⁹

In *Advertising Age*, Garfield and Levy report on “brand sustainability” being predicted both by frequency of transaction and level of consumer trust. Brands like Amazon, which ranks high on both measures, “typically spend little on advertising—because they don’t need it.”⁴⁰ In its most established markets Amazon has hardly been known for traditional forms of advertising such as TV spots, billboards, print ads, or direct mail. In its first year, the company did minimal paid advertising, relying instead on word-of-mouth and other forms of buzz online.⁴¹ Preferring to drive traffic to sites via “associates,” or other websites that would link specific book titles to the Amazon site in exchange for a small cut of any resulting purchase, the company spent only 10 percent of its sales revenue on advertising and marketing, compared to the 119 percent of typical internet startups in the 1990s.⁴² In 2001, when Amazon was struggling to weather the dot.com bust, Bezos started to question the company’s return on investment on the expensive forms of traditional advertising it had begun such as TV advertising, and ended up radically rethinking advertising and marketing.⁴³ Bezos decided to reroute those advertising dollars into improving the experience of individual consumers, via lower prices and fast, free shipping, betting that word of mouth and customer loyalty would be the payoff. He said, “In the old world, you devoted 30 percent of your time to building a great service and 70 percent of your time to shouting about it. In the new world, that inverts.”⁴⁴ The shift in strategy was successful, making Amazon one of the fastest-growing ecommerce companies of the twenty-first century.

Starting in 2004, Amazon did start to increase its ad spend year over year, with particularly large increases in the late 2010s. With a 34 percent increase in spending from 2018, Amazon became the world’s largest advertiser in

2019, vaulting from the number 5 to the number 1 spot.⁴⁵ As Amazon has launched new products (Echo smart speakers, Fire TV, Amazon fashion) and services (Prime Video, Alexa, Amazon Music), as well as launched a new retail “holiday”—Prime Day, a massive sale usually in the summer meant to boost sales during a traditionally slow season, the company has had reason to address consumers directly about something other than their specific purchases. A significant portion, close to 40 percent, of the massive 2019 ad spend was focused on markets outside the United States, as Amazon continues to invest in its international markets.⁴⁶

Today many companies are trying to figure out how to switch their product brands from “purchase” to “usage,” which is not always an easy fit. Create an app with household cleaning tips for your cleaning products? Create an online game that consumers can play with QR codes on the products that they buy? Creative ideas, but realistically the rate of adoption and usage of these features will be modest, if they take off at all. In contrast, a brand like Amazon that provides multiple consumer-facing services has a built-in reason to be useful to the consumer throughout their day. Over the last twenty-five years a loyal Amazon customer may have gone from interacting with the brand a few times a year to buy hard-to-find books, to several times a day, especially if they use Amazon’s mobile app or interact with Alexa via an Echo device. If using the streaming services, they spend extended periods connected to Amazon. It’s hard to imagine that kind of exponential increase of consumer touches with a brand that produces physical products, or even specific services like hotel accommodations, although these brands are certainly trying.

The explosion in smartphone and tablet use is a significant factor in increasing the frequency of interactions between consumers and brands. Apps and push alerts for mobile, smart speakers, AI-enabled digital assistants, and smart things are all tools of the ubiquitous, convenient brand. As Amazon can be reached through more devices, and as it provides more products and services, it gets closer to its goal of being always with us.

AMAZON, THE AFFECTIVE BRAND

One day I made an impulsive purchase on Amazon. I bought animal-print kitten heels that I was convinced I would rock at extremely hypothetical parties and in particularly confident teaching moments. I bought

them on Amazon from a third-party seller, and they took quite a while to arrive, unlike products that I buy with some regularity using my Prime membership. When they came, they were too big, very stiff, and not as cute as I had imagined them to be. I figured out how to make a return and put them in the mail within the week, thinking no more about it until about six weeks later I received an email from Amazon pointing out that I had indicated a return on the site but had not yet received my refund. I realized that this was the case, confirmed it with Amazon as instructed, and within a couple of days the refund arrived. I'm well aware that the prompt was almost certainly automated, likely flagged by an algorithm on the lookout for slow refunds of returned merchandise. But I can honestly, and with some embarrassment, report that I felt very "cared for" and "seen" by Amazon in that interaction. The company identified a problem I didn't even know I had, and went out of its way to solve it for me. Amazon's number one principle has always been "customer obsession," and this was a clear example of that orientation.

Amazon is not typically conceptualized as an emotional or affective brand, but I argue that Amazon is highly affective, albeit in a subtle way. People may not get Amazon tattoos, like they do for beloved brands like Nike or Harley Davidson, and you are unlikely to see people wearing Amazon-branded gear (because Amazon doesn't make it), but the attachment is nonetheless there. The evidence is in the repeated purchases, the depth of trust, the consumer loyalty, and the brand affection.

Amazon is an affective brand whose techniques for producing strong relationships with consumers exemplify broader trends in branding and marketing in the digital age, characterized by a shift in emphasis from traditional forms of advertising aimed to the masses, or even to niches, to highly individualized relationship marketing, made possible by the affordances of interactive, digital communications. Recent years have seen increasing interest among scholars in theorizing the affective aspects of capitalism.⁴⁷ Affect captures the idea of intensity or feeling that moves us to act or affects our body in some way, even if we don't have the language to explain the experience, or possibly, even if we are not conscious of it. Affect is a useful lens for considering how a social relationship, even a sense of intimacy, develops between consumers and brands. The analysis of affect brings our attention to brand attachments, trust, and the

energy that puts people and things into motion, be it through purchasing, online forms of expression, or seeking out other consumers.⁴⁸

Amazon is a brand with little explicit emotional content but a powerful affective presence. Many successful brands have used emotional appeals—Nike’s “Just Do It,” Hallmark’s “They’ll Never Forget You Remembered,” Disney’s “The Happiest Place on Earth,” and L’Oréal’s “Because I’m Worth It.” Amazon, rather than telling an affective *story* per se, builds an affective relationship with its customers through *interaction*. And a key part of that interaction is reliable access to and efficient delivery of goods, making the affective relation tangible and touchable on a regular basis through goods and the boxes they come in.

Critical scholar Sara Ahmed looks to Marx’s conceptualization of circulation as a metaphor to understand the accumulation of social affects. She argues that we misrecognize emotions as “belonging” or “attaching” to objects or persons (in her analysis, the case of “hate” toward groups seen as “other”), when our sense of this is only produced through an “affective economy” created by the *circulation* of affect, across discursive moments through time. Just as the circulation of money-capital-money leads to the accumulation of value, so does the circulation of discourse create affective accumulation.⁴⁹ While capital “gains its power through circulation,”⁵⁰ affect also accumulates its power through circulation. What does it mean to focus on the accumulation of affect through circulation? In the worlds of branding and marketing, it means looking at interactions with a brand over time, how a brand seeks to be “with us” on our phones or other devices, the “touches” between consumer and brand, and how a brand communicates responsiveness by acknowledging and even anticipating consumer needs and desires. As Andrew McStay has argued, it’s an *ecological* rather than *representational* approach to analyzing, and producing, advertising.⁵¹

Representationally Amazon might seem simple. In 2000 the company launched its current logo with its brand name “Amazon” in its distinctive typeface (see figure 0.1). The orange arrow points from the “a” to the “z” of “amazon,” signaling the company’s transition from solely an online bookstore where you might purchase titles starting from “a” to “z,” to where all products from “a” to “z” can be found.⁵² The arrow is also a dynamic element that emphasizes Amazon as a brand that *delivers*, from

its warehouses to customers' doorsteps. And the orange arrow resembles a smile, an iconic nod to the affective relationship Amazon seeks to cultivate with its customers.

Industry research shows that consumers are indeed very attached to the brand. Amazon is consistently at or near the top of lists of Americans' most-loved brands. Amazon topped the 2017 Love List Brand Affinity Index produced by Condé Nast with Goldman Sachs, based on a survey with millennials and "gen z."⁵³ It was number 1 on Morning Consult's 2019 list of America's Most Loved Brands.⁵⁴ The Harris Poll's 2018 reputation rankings for brands found Amazon.com in the number 1 spot—meaning it is both visible and has a positive reputation—and at or near the top of most of the components of reputation they measure, including Emotional Appeal, for which Amazon was also in the number 1 spot, ahead of brands like Chick-fil-A and Nike.⁵⁵

Trust is one of the most powerful feelings people can have about a brand, particularly a digital brand like Amazon where people may never interact with a human representative of the company. Organizations identify America's "most trusted brands" using different methodologies, but Amazon comes out on top on many of these lists, such as one put out by The Values Institute, which found Amazon to be the country's most trusted brand in 2017 based on a survey measuring attitudes to brands on the following factors: Consistency, Competence, Candor, Concern, and Connection.⁵⁶ Amazon also came in at number 10 on Forbes' top 100 most trustworthy brands, and Interbrand found Amazon to be the fourth most trusted brand in 2018.⁵⁷ Somewhat shockingly, the Baker Center at Georgetown University, in their 2018 poll on American Institutional Confidence, found Amazon to be the number 2 institution in which



0.1 Amazon's logo since 2000. Source: "Images and Videos: Logos," *Amazon Press Center*, n.d., <https://press.aboutamazon.com/images-videos>, accessed May 23, 2021.

Americans have the greatest confidence, second only to the military, and ahead of all other levels of government, colleges and universities, non-profits, and even major companies in general.⁵⁸ For Democrats, Amazon was number 1.

Like all brands, Amazon is very attentive to how people perceive it and feel about it—the heart of its brand value. In 2011, in the wake of a scandal about a price comparison app that Amazon had launched that seemingly encouraged consumers to “spy” on other retailers and report on their prices, Jeff Bezos wrote a memo to his senior executives that came to be known as the “Amazon.love memo.”⁵⁹ Drawing from his own observations of what led some companies, like Apple, Nike, and Disney to be beloved, while equally successful companies like Walmart, Microsoft, and Goldman Sachs were disliked or feared, Bezos generated a list of what consumers found to be “cool” or “not cool,” reproduced in part here:

Rudeness is not cool.

Defeating tiny guys is not cool.

Close-following is not cool.

Young is cool.

Risk taking is cool.

Winning is cool.⁶⁰

Although Amazon tries to control how people see the brand, and especially how the press covers it, through their public-facing communications, the company’s most powerful tool for getting people to “love” it is the nature of each and every interaction it has with its customers. While Amazon is a brand for which explicit promotional content is not generally emotional (the reading of the logo’s arrow as a smile notwithstanding), it creates strong affective connections, even intimacy, with consumers through ongoing “touches,” be these virtual or physical. Getting what you want on your doorstep in a short amount of time, in the plain brown box with the recognizable tape and the Amazon logo—these are all elements designed to produce an affective response. Perhaps the response is relief, or gratitude, or joy, or satisfaction, or the comfort in a predictable relationship. The response may not have a name, or be the same every time, but the repeated touches over time accumulate into an affective relation. Given the company’s focus on “customer obsession,” our feelings have most likely been carefully calibrated to maximize trust

and loyalty and minimize reflection and scrutiny. The way we relate to Amazon is crucial to the question of whether and how we will use our agency as consumers and responsibility as citizens to grapple with the impact of Amazon's market dominance on our society and our planet.

SCOPE OF THE BOOK AND ORGANIZATION

Given my focus on Amazon as a brand, *Buy Now* focuses squarely on Amazon's consumer-facing products, services, and marketing. As such I draw on Amazon's website; the programs, products, and services it offers its consumers; its advertising and marketing materials; its press releases and public relations efforts; news coverage of the company and other evidence of its public image; trade press and industry reporting about its strategies and place in the market; industry reports on consumer use and response; and fieldwork in Amazon's consumer spaces, including brick-and-mortar store concepts and fulfillment center tours for the public. These investigations primarily look at the US context, where Amazon was founded and where it enjoys its greatest market dominance, but also considers Amazon's activities beyond US borders, particularly in chapter 7, which focuses on Amazon's global ambitions. I consider the "behind-the-scenes" of Amazon's operations to the extent that what we know from reporting about Amazon's infrastructures, labor conditions, and business practices conflicts with the image and relationship it presents to customers. Amazon is very active in business-to-business services including Amazon Web Services, Amazon Marketplace, and Fulfillment by Amazon—while I consider these for their role in Amazon's overall business strategy, they are not my primary focus. This book does not offer original reporting from Amazon employees, current or former (most of whom are subject to non-disclosure agreements), or proprietary documents and spaces.

This project seeks to contribute to interdisciplinary conversations about the relationships among the spheres of technology, culture, and the economy. I am careful not to err on the side of saying that the digital economy is a source of *sui generis* disruption that is remaking our culture from the ground up. Rather, I aim to show how Amazon, as one of the current behemoths of the digital economy, is building on existing trends in the commodification of data and culture, as well as driving disruptive

change in some areas. Similarly, although founder and executive chairman of Amazon Jeff Bezos will get his due, I don't focus exclusively on him as a business genius as a number of other books have done, preferring instead to see him as particularly attuned to shifts in technology, economy, and culture, and the resulting opportunities therein.

The book is organized in three parts that reflect my explanations for how Amazon has achieved ubiquity and market dominance with relatively few obstacles and proportionately little pushback on the part of consumers or governments. The reasons for this rapid rise of Amazon's platform ubiquity are structural, cultural, and semiotic, and the three parts on Distribution, Culture, and Image map onto these. Part 1, "Distribution," focuses on Amazon's core function of circulating information and goods. Chapter 1 establishes historical context for distribution brands, looking back to Sears as a precursor distribution brand, and across the marketplace today to Amazon's distribution partners and competitors USPS, UPS, and Walmart. Distinguishing disruption from continuity in the digital economy is central to this chapter, as I apply Marxist analyses of the circulation of capital to Amazon's business model, and highlight what has shifted with the turn to digital capitalism and, relatedly, platform capitalism. This chapter also considers how all distribution brands, to some extent, are affective brands built on service rather than image-based marketing, and how Amazon has been able to use the affordances of digital communication technologies to achieve that to the nth degree.

In chapter 2 I highlight how Amazon achieves affective connections with consumers less through symbolic means than material and interactive ones, beginning with the materiality of the branded brown box. While a key part of Amazon's business model is to speed up the circulation of capital, by reducing friction in purchasing and time from click to ship to delivery, the company generally discourages consumers from knowing about or reflecting on the labor and infrastructure required to deliver their goods in unprecedented short delivery windows. From a Marxist perspective, I characterize this consumer relation with Amazon's delivery capabilities as "distribution fetishism." As Amazon starts to respond to public pressure to be more transparent about its warehouse conditions and environmental impacts, I consider the optics of Amazon's public fulfillment center tours and public relations efforts around climate and waste, and conclude that

rematerializing our understanding of digital distribution means more than rendering it visually “transparent.”

Part 2, “Culture,” focuses on Amazon’s media and communication services, including book retailing, media streaming, and smart speakers. Amazon doesn’t just purvey books, movies, and information; it uses these products and services to forge personalized relations with its customers. It uses our interest in cultural products to hook us into its Prime “ecosystem.” Amazon is converting its early focus on retail sales into the provision of cultural “services” so it can collect ever more data about us, with which it can offer us the service of personalized convenience. Beginning with chapter 3, I consider Amazon’s origin and evolution as a bookseller, with an eye to what platformization has meant for the books business, bookstores, and readers. Like the big box retailers that came before it, Amazon has used the tools of the digital economy to intensify the commodification of books, inspiring anxiety from authors, publishers, booksellers, and readers about the commercialization of this revered form of culture. Being more than just a large company—a platform—has afforded Amazon the ability to vertically integrate its business in books to an unprecedented extent, and therefore achieve a position of market dominance and control in publishing and marketing books. This chapter considers Amazon’s development of the Kindle and the associated explosion in ebooks, as well as the world of brick-and-mortar retail, which Amazon moved into for the first time with the introduction of its Amazon Books retail locations in the United States. Focusing on these stores, I examine how Amazon uses the techniques of online retail to personalize even physical retail spaces for its customers, which serves to strengthen the relationship between consumer and brand while dividing and discriminating among consumers as a bloc.

In chapter 4 I turn my attention to one of Amazon’s most successful electronics products, the Echo smart speaker, and its associated AI (artificial intelligence)-enabled digital assistant, Alexa. This chapter continues my focus on Amazon’s media-related products and services, while turning to an issue relevant not just to Amazon but also to other tech brands—the commodification of personal data in platform capitalism. I argue that rather than obscuring its surveillance capacities, Amazon generally sells surveillance as a service, and uses it to build intimacy with the consumer, borne

of domestic familiarity and responsiveness to the self. While personalized service has been a longstanding aspect of Amazon's business strategy and brand promise, with Alexa we see an intensified version of personalized service that positions the consumer no longer as a choosing subject, the typical subjectivity of consumer culture, but as a served self, transferring agency and decision power from consumer to brand. I posit that the subjectivity of the served self is one of the costs of convenience that conspires to limit critical reflection and resistance from consumers to Amazon's intrusiveness and market dominance.

In chapter 5 I turn to Amazon's streaming services and examine how ecommerce commodifies culture in new ways. I consider the implications of a service brand like Amazon—known primarily in many markets for good deals and quick delivery on everything from diapers to electronics to groceries—also becoming a media brand. I argue that in many of its promotions for its media holdings, Amazon doesn't just commodify media, but commoditizes it, through its emphasis on Prime Video as a value proposition for the consumer. In fact, Amazon promotes Prime Video in two ways—as a commoditized value proposition, and as an irreplaceable destination for exclusive content. By extending its ubiquity and emphasis on convenience to the world of media, Amazon presents media content as just another service that it can provide, and uses entertainment to recruit Prime members and keep them firmly in the fold.

Part 3, "Image," steps back from specific services in order to examine the rhetorical and promotional strategies that Amazon uses to influence how people conceptualize and feel about it, considering both consumers and regulators as key constituencies. In chapter 6 I highlight the techniques Amazon uses to normalize its market dominance and the ubiquity of its platforms. In addition to reviewing the legal and regulatory conditions that have allowed platforms like Amazon to achieve their market dominance relatively uncontested (until recently), especially in the United States, I draw attention to the way Amazon has crafted itself as a brand of ubiquity through the use of naturalistic metaphors, such as "ecosystem," "cloud," and the brand name itself. Branding techniques that frame Amazon's ubiquity as natural produce a taken-for-granted invisibility that is politically useful as concerns over its conflicts of interest as a platform business, the

consequences of market concentration, its outsized power in labor markets, and the environmental impacts of the digital economy put Amazon into an unwelcome spotlight.

I continue stepping out to see the bigger picture in chapter 7, in which I examine Amazon's global activities through the lens of "platform imperialism."⁶¹ I recount Amazon's efforts to spread across the globe, and how different countries have responded to these moves. Considering both Amazon's successes, like India, and its failures, as in China, the chapter notes that Amazon's goal of achieving global ubiquity is far from complete, and that it presents itself differently to foreign markets than at home, in part because it comes already marked by its Americanness. Amazon's efforts at localizing its image and services have met with mixed success, but its business advantages as a platform company with very deep pockets that make it possible to subsidize the investments required to grow in new markets make it a formidable competitor.

In the concluding chapter I acknowledge one of the greatest sources of pushback against Amazon's ubiquity and market power—its workers. I recount not just what efforts Amazon workers have made and with what success, but also why it is among workers rather than consumers or competitors that we see the most visible and effective activism. In this concluding chapter I ask: What do consumer politics and subjectivities look like in the age of ubiquitous platform brands like Amazon? What are the possibilities and obstacles for resistance and change in the context of platform capitalism? This investigation considers how Amazon's brand logic fragments consumers as a political bloc, and forges brand intimacies via surveillance and personalization that undermine the subjectivity of consumer-as-citizen. While distribution fetishism, cultivation of the served self, and naturalistic metaphors all work to normalize Amazon as a brand of convenience and therefore its ubiquity in our lives and our societies, I point to ways of thinking and acting that people could adopt to reclaim some of their consumer power and rights as citizens relative to the power of platforms.

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