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LOCATING AND THEORIZING PLATFORM POWER

Thomas Poell
University of Amsterdam

David Nieborg
University of Toronto

José van Dijck
Utrecht University

Robyn Caplan
Data & Society Research Institute

Anne Helmond
Utrecht University

Fernando van der Vlist
Utrecht University

Julie Chen
University of Toronto

Jean-Christophe Plantin
London School of Economics

Amidst popular conversations about antitrust regulation and trillion-dollar valuations, the notion of "platform power" has found firm footing in the scholarly lexicon. Media and communication scholars have tried to unpack platform power by theorizing forms of corporate control that include "algorithmic power" (Bucher, 2018), "curatorial power" (Prey, 2020), and "metric power" (Beer, 2017). These studies are complemented by research that seeks to theorize and investigate the infrastructural, organizational, and economic dimensions of corporate control (Caplan & boyd 2018; Nieborg & Helmond,

2018; Plantin et al., 2018; Srnicek 2016). Even business scholars have become more cognizant and vocal about the unprecedented clustering of capital, turning to decades old antitrust instruments to reign in platform companies (Parker et al., 2021). Likewise, scholars at the intersection of economics and geography have considered how globally operating platforms impact local labor markets (Kenney & Zysman, 2020).

It should be noted, however, that these conversations about platform power largely play out within the confines of self-defined disciplinary silos. True dialogues across the fields of media and communications, geography, economics, and management are still quite rare. This panel aims to enable such a dialogue, drawing insights from these different fields to more systematically examine how platform power takes shape and evolves. In this effort, we build on Van Dijck and colleagues' (2019) reframing of the notion of platform power. Crucially, these authors recognize that power in platform markets is *relational*, but also *highly uneven*. And they understand platform companies not as monolithic entities but as operators of complex ecosystems.

The panel locates and theorizes platform power through five case studies, focusing on: 1) video sharing platforms, 2) app stores, 3) programmatic advertising networks, 4) labor staffing intermediaries, and 5) cloud computing. Each case study starts with the question: *where* do relations of dependence take shape on the examined platform(s) and *how* are these relations organized? Addressing this question, the panelists hypothesize that platform power is exerted, codified, and operationalized around particular *infrastructural platform services*, which enable specific economic activities, such as advertising, content sharing, data analysis, labor staffing and management, cloud hosting, and so on. Leading platform companies typically own and operate a range of such services, which are tied together in unified corporate structures. We argue that each of these individual services has taken on infrastructural properties as they have morphed into ubiquitous, networked sociotechnical systems. Therefore, rather than analyzing how a platform company constitutes an all-powerful monolithic entity, the panel calls for greater specificity by locating and analyzing the set(s) of services that together constitute platform power.

In this inquiry, the panelists specifically focus on the *evolution* of platforms. Infrastructural services, such as Facebook Reels or the Apple's App Store each set standards and provide gateways for complementors–content and service providers, advertisers, data intermediaries, talent agencies–to access other institutional actors, data, and end-users. Yet, such services are also constantly adapted to local regulatory frameworks, to retain end-users and complementors, and to respond to competitors in platform ecosystems. In turn, such changes force complementors to adapt their own operations to continue offering their products and services through the platform. It is in these moments of change, when relations of dependence are reshuffled, that platform power becomes most visible.

In combination, the five case studies will provide detailed insights into how and where relations of dependence take shape in the platform ecosystem and how these relations evolve over time. This investigation not only focuses on the large US-based, but also explicitly interrogates the development of platform power from a European and Chinese perspective.

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