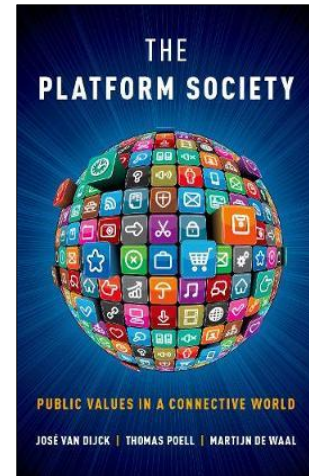


José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, **The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018, 226 pp., \$22.00 (paperback).

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While the platformization idea is reaching its momentum, van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal’s book, **The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World**, aims at providing a systematic account of the new technosocial order. For this purpose, the authors propose a theory grounded in three main assumptions: the operational definition of *platform*, the three processes lying at the heart of the system, and finally, the distinction between infrastructural and sectorial platforms.

Van Dijk, Poell, and de Waal’s definition, firstly, relies on four main elements: platforms are “fueled by data,” organized by algorithms, ruled by “ownership relations driven by business models,” and “governed through user agreements” (pp. 9–12). This is a useful framework, as it is an all-embracing one, leaving space for specific analysis, due to the wide range of agreements and business models existing in the actual digital economy—which is what the authors would do in the second part of the book. As already noted, the work provides a useful investigation on the variety of data-capturing techniques, along with an explanation of the plurality of scales at which platforms operate (Plantin, 2019).

Secondly, datafication, commodification, and selection represent the three mechanisms giving strength to platformization. This is a sort of three-step process, with platforms appropriating data, translating them into economic value, and using them for selecting the most relevant contents or services to offer, by means of rating and algorithm-driven procedures. The governance of each platform is therefore determined by the specific version of these mechanisms they embed. As we will see, though, the authors’ use of the “commodification” concept is one of the main issues to address.

Finally, van Dijk, Poell, and de Waal introduce a distinction between infrastructural platforms—Google/Alphabet, Facebook, Microsoft, Apple, Amazon—and sectorial platforms, such as Airbnb or Uber, which are specialized on specific tasks and often based on the services provided by the infrastructural ones. When it comes to the sectorial platforms, their asset-less nature also leads the authors to distinguish between the role of connectors—digital services taking together providers and individual users—and that of complementors—organizations able to use the platforms for their purposes.

While the second part of the book includes a detailed analysis of some sectorial platforms—ranging from news to urban transport, health, and education—I will rather focus on its main theoretical goal. And with this respect, when one considers the ambition of defining a general theory of contemporary society as *platform society*, the authors’ attempt seems to fall short. Given the popularity of this work, which I do

consider an excellent essay, it is therefore necessary to take into account its shortcomings and three main limits affecting, to put it briefly, the historical, theoretical, and critical level of sociological investigation.

At the historical level, no space is made for discussing the continuity or discontinuity between this configuration and previous general frameworks—which is what Manuel Castells (1996) rather tried to do, while defining the network society theory against the backdrop of post-Fordist, postindustrial and postmodern literature. To name just an example, it is not clear whether or not the infrastructural role played by platforms should be intended in continuity with the monopolistic tendency of digital economy (McChesney, 2013), which is a new chapter in the cyclical story of decentralization and centralization, punctuated by disruptive moments of capitalistic innovation (Harvey, 2010; Wu, 2011).

The second aspect has to do with platform being a descriptive, more than theoretical, concept—and as a consequence, with the five infrastructural platforms overlapping the “Big Five” journalistic expression. Nonetheless, those platforms depend on very different business models, with data exploitation being central for some of them, mostly instrumental to market profiling for others (Amazon), and not even part of the core business in some cases (such as Apple, which is basically an industrial company). To some extent, this idea is part of a broader tendency to consider data as the main—if not only—source of value for digital capitalism (see Couldry & Mejias 2019; Mayer-Schönberger & Ramge, 2018). Nonetheless, data exploitation is one form of exploitation, to be analyzed in connection with the various levels of content production, industrial externalization, financial profit, both waged and unwaged labor, and so on. Not accidentally, very little attention is paid, in *The Platform Society*, to the dimension of labor and to capital/labor conflict—even when triggered by the same platformization process, as in such cases as the gig economy and the precarity of App workers (as already observed in Gelderbroem 2019, p. 990). One may notice that a more concrete focus on labor was present in other interpretations of platform society, such as Srnicek’s *Platform Capitalism* (2017). What is more surprising, furthermore, is that the authors do not take a clear position about the consequences of datafication, observing how both empowerment and disempowerment and enabling and disabling effects are brought about by platformization (pp. 55–56)—which is plausible for every sociotechnical configuration. One may argue that the datafication concept, if taken seriously, should rather lead to a more radical conclusion about the nature of platform society, with structure fatally becoming more relevant than agency.

The main issue I would like to raise, finally, is related to critical theory. As we saw, van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal consider exploitation as a main aspect of platform economy, and properly define it as the transformation of “online *and* offline objects, activities, emotions, and ideas into tradable commodities” (p. 37, emphasis in the original)—words that seem to mirror a Marxist analysis. They do, however, frame the platform business model in the “multisided market” concept, endorsing the idea that the market is the meeting place between demand and offer, where different social players look for an agreement, and economic value takes its form. This is a totally acceptable idea, obviously, but also an idea totally incompatible with the concept of exploitation as such. The fact is that extraction of value, according to Marx, is realized before the players meet in the job market, due to the appropriation of material means on the part of capital—so that the marginal profits and costs that the market gives rise to, in the end, do not make a real difference. It is not a matter of words; when choosing the connoted concept of commodification,

rather than the more neutral one of commoditization, the authors seem to embrace Marxist critical analysis—while eventually coming to the very opposite conclusion.

In the end, van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal's book provides a very interesting definition of platform society, along with a detailed analysis of the way many sectorial platforms work. When it comes to general social theory, though, we can detect some missing spots in their interpretation, and a certain inclination to frame different processes in terms of platformization, as we can see in the chapters dedicated to governance and geopolitics. To some extent, the risk we are running is that of reification of platform as a universal keyword, to repeat Jan van Dijk's (1999) critique of Castells' classical work, pointing to his early tendency toward the reification of the network as a main factor in human history. For the platform society to become the new paradigm in Internet studies, so, much work will be needed.

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