

Special Issue Editorial

Public Policy in the Platform Society

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This editorial introduces the articles in our special issue (9:3-4) of *Policy and Internet* on “The Platform Society”, arising from the journal’s IPP2016 conference held at the University of Oxford on 22–23 September 2016. The editorial provides an outline of existing academic research on online platforms; discusses platform labor, platform governance, and platform politics as three key research themes; and discusses the implications for public policy and future research directions.

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We live in the era of the “platform society.” We get up in the morning and read our news or catch up with friends on social media platforms. Our journey to work may involve a platform-enabled lift in a stranger’s car or a shared-use bike. We purchase everything from books to dishwasher filters, and now even groceries via Amazon, never thinking to consider where the actual seller is located or who they employ, for how long, whilst other Fortune 500 businesses use online platforms to buy labor, piecemeal from across the globe (Corporaal & Lehdonvirta 2017). Even our interactions with government are increasingly undertaken online via centralized platforms that promise to deliver a wide range of services with a seamless, customer-focused experience whilst providing competition in areas such as the provision of identity services.

There is a compelling neo-liberal logic to such online platforms directly connecting crowds of buyers and sellers, or friends and social relations, or governments and citizens: they promise faster and more efficient transactions, better customer-targeting, greater transparency and more perfect competition in prices, wages and quality. Yet at the same time, the emergence of the platform society has created problems, largely as a result of the way social processes have been extracted from traditional (often nationally constrained) regulatory frameworks. For example, many governments are now grappling with platform-focused questions such as how to limit the over-supply of guest accommodation

in their cities, or how to ensure that cab services offer fair and transparent pricing to all regardless of location or identity. Other policy concerns, such as the need for just labor practices in the gig economy are being driven by those workers for whom the economic benefits of this particular innovation have proved disappointing (Graham, Hjorth, & Lehdonvirta 2017). Meanwhile, the protections against hate speech and fake information run up against rights to free speech and equal participation in many social media platforms, with no easy means of focus or resolution.

The growing public focus on the implications of the platform society is mirrored in an increasing body of academic research on the subject. Platform studies initially emerged from studies of video games and argued for analysis of the technical architecture of the computing system on which games were played, in order to provide new insight into the way that different platforms (such as Atari and Nintendo) shaped the gaming experience (Bogost & Montfort 2009). More recently, infrastructure studies have been argued as another useful framework for analyzing the use and implications of online platforms that are effectively serving as shared public infrastructure (Plantin et al. 2016). However, neither field has a monopoly on the study of platforms and (as reflected in this collection of articles), the array of academic disciplines studying these phenomena is now keeping pace with the rapidly growing array of digital services that are described as “platforms.”

This last point is more contentious than it initially seems. What exactly is a platform? We all think we know one when we see it, but what are its fundamental features, and how do these features shape what can be done with or to platforms? As Tarleton Gillespie has noted, the various (non-digital) meanings of the word bring different connotations that are frequently elided in public discourse to make our use of the term inherently political (Gillespie 2010). Instead of understanding the term in its purist, computational sense (something that can be coded on or for), Gillespie argues that we increasingly think of online platforms as providing open spaces for speech or service delivery, a neutral host where users provide the content—an interpretation which perhaps serves the companies rather well as they seek to navigate both regulatory pressures and competing demands from different user groups (Gillespie 2010). Indeed, the definition of what companies like Uber or Deliveroo are, has become a matter for legal debate, as drivers and riders go to court to demand employment rights.

Andersson Schwartz (2017) makes an even stronger point in this special issue. Users may see digital platforms as technologies that enable us to share, communicate or transact freely, but in reality they are governing systems that control, interact and accumulate. Indeed, platforms are increasingly being forced to make governance decisions whether they want to or not (consider Twitter’s suspension of more than half a million users for allegedly posting extremist

content).¹ The governance model they embody is one where different settings, requirements or exclusions can all be enabled with the flick of a switch. Such insights matter, first, because they improve our understanding of the risks and opportunities inherent in the platform society, but perhaps more importantly because they enable us to make better normative judgments of how to manage the platform society for the public good.

These questions were at the heart of our last “Internet, Politics and Policy” conference held in 2016, with a theme of “The Platform Society.”² Organized across three tracks (platform labor, platform governance, and platform politics), the conference heard from papers drawn from a range of disciplines including political science, economics, sociology, communication studies, law, computational social science, geography, and education. The papers covered issues ranging from legal liability and human rights to digital currencies, to government control of news agendas, to user behavior in large-scale education platforms. Some of the best of these conference papers have now now published in this double special issue of *Policy & Internet*. These articles cover a broad range of topics, however they also can be grouped into what we believe are three major themes that run through studies of these platforms. Considering them together may, we hope, be helpful in structuring further analysis of “the platform society.”

The first theme concerns the nature of the platform society, and (perhaps unsurprisingly given Gillespie’s observations), the evaluation of its claims to connection and openness. As can be seen in all the articles here, a key feature of the platforms studied is their purported capacity to link different groups, individuals and organizations, either with each other, or with goods and services. This propensity for connection and openness in turn generates rich grounds for research: do all users have the same opportunity to connect or transact; what data can we collect to expose patterns of transaction or interaction; are these platforms really as open and democratic as they seem? In this special issue, this theme is picked up by Rosenblat et al. (2017), who study the case of Uber’s customer rating system, arguing that “biased consumer ratings” may lead to workplace discrimination and hence very uneven opportunities for drivers. It is also tackled by Garcia et al. (2017), who present a ground-breaking study of popularity and social influence on Twitter, showing how attention is distributed unevenly around the platform, and what the consequences of this are for activity and influence. Finally, it is a theme picked up by Rathnayake and Winter (2017), who address the debate on whether social media benefit only extroverted, open minded

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/12/extremists-driven-off-facebook-and-twitter-targeting-smaller-firms>

² <http://ipp.oii.ox.ac.uk/2016/>

individuals (arguing provocatively that the platforms in fact benefit multiple types of individuals).

The second theme flowing on from the first, concerns the operationalization of the platform society. Given the initial concerns of platform studies it is perhaps unsurprising that much of the research on this theme aims to investigate the coding or design decisions shaping the ways in which platforms can be used. More specifically, given the focus on platforms' capacity to connect outlined above, how do these design and coding decisions shape platform openness? How do they influence our interactions or transactions and do they do so transparently or overtly? In this collection, Aragón et al. (2017) examine how different methods of presenting the same conversations on the same platform can result in radically different outcomes in terms of the quality of deliberation. Esau et al. (2017) address a similar question but with a cross-platform study, arguing that comments on news forums show much higher levels of deliberation than comments on Facebook news pages. Finally, Jürgens and Stark (2017) address the power of default content settings to influence topic selection on Reddit, showing just how important these settings are in shaping user behavior.

The third and last theme unites and responds to the first two, raising empirical and normative questions of *regulability* (Lessig 2006), namely the extent to which platforms can be regulated, and if so how this can best be achieved. The rhetoric of the platform society promises openness and connection, whilst the design and coding of these platforms, and the human decisions and values behind these, affects their capacity to deliver these goods. Markets have traditionally been regulated by the state to protect worker and consumer rights, to reduce negative externalities and to raise taxes. But the platform society provides many challenges to this model. The potential of the gig economy to provide paid work for many who have previously been excluded from employment is often held up as a great opportunity; likewise, the chance for tourists to stay in a comfy local flat rather than an impersonal hotel. From this perspective, platforms such as TaskRabbit or AirBnB are regulatory innovators, using their own governance resources to shape the matrix of opportunities available to society. But others see platforms like these as regulatory avoiders, companies set up to work around long-standing rules and regulations without providing alternative protections, and then benefiting from the cost savings. In this collection in particular, Zeng et al. (2017) contribute to this debate by evaluating the effectiveness of rumor management strategies on Sina Weibo (showing that both rebuttal and removal strategies lead, ironically, to increased discussion of the rumor itself). Jørgensen (2017), meanwhile, focuses more specifically on the individuals behind these technical decisions, elucidating what senior executives at platform companies understand by human rights, and how they seek to apply this in their business practices. Finally, Andersson Schwarz (2017) takes a broader look at the forms of

government which can be found in the digital platform model, seeking to present a concept of “platform logic” as a broad way of understanding decision making in these systems.

If the themes outlined above are to be at all useful, it must be in demonstrating the intellectual and practical contribution of articles such as those published here in helping us to answer fundamental questions about the promise and perils of the platform society. They also highlight the scope for further research. But whilst there are many opportunities for intellectually ambitious and practically valuable research in this area, there are also obvious problems. The sheer scale of the research subject is undeniably a barrier. It will be hard enough to analyze the full societal implications of a single platform in one country at one moment in time; understanding the operation and interaction of multiple platforms across different jurisdictions, whilst they all-the-while adapt and update their code, is a tough ask. Perhaps more fundamentally though, we are observing a significant cultural, political and economic shift which may yet subvert the very practice of empirical research. As activities previously conducted in public (news circulation, advertising, provision of taxi or hotel services) move onto privately owned platforms, opportunities for data collection and analysis diminish (Margetts et al 2016). Other newer activities that have developed with these digital platforms may only be measured and analyzed by those with internal access to proprietary data. Without access to this data, it may prove impossible to conduct rigorous academic research into many aspects of life in the platform society.

As a journal dedicated to furthering the understanding of public policy issues arising in the Internet era, it is helpful to conclude our introductory analysis by considering the policy implications emerging from the articles that follow. Three merit particular attention. First, the point that considerations of social justice, equality and non-discrimination become more, not less important in a society where goods, services and other more intangible resources such as societal respect, reputation or information are distributed algorithmically. Second, that regulability does not necessarily mean regulation according to existing rules and standards or enforcement through traditional institutions. If society is to benefit from the opportunities provided by platform innovation, it is particularly important that regulation is not driven by the vested interests of those industries or institutions which have most to lose, but rather by fresh assessments of what constitute the public good (Benkler 2003). Finally, and with this recommendation in mind, we can reflect once more on the value-laden metaphor of “the platform.” The assumptions of openness, connection, opportunity and neutrality that accompany the term in public discourse should be subjected to quiet critical reflection. Does the marketization of personal data or reputation deliver benefits to all? To the many? Or the few? Does the new efficiency of government as a

platform improve citizen–state relations, and is this an advance for democracy? Questions such as these cannot be answered in a single journal issue, let alone a single article. But each article published here from the IPP2016 conference reminds us that as Pasquale (2016) has argued elsewhere, the neo-liberal narratives of platform capitalism are and should continue to be, subject to empirical as well as analytical and normative tests.

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