

Delia BALABAN*

Review of *The Platform Society. Public Values in a Connective World* by José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, 240 pages

In a society based on *sharing economy* and personalized services, the book *The Platform Society. Public Values in a Connective World* is focused on a relevant contemporary issue, that of the *platform-driven change of society*. The book offers a *comprehensive view of a connected world* (p.2) where several areas of society are subject to change. By using techniques that enable connectedness and supported by a *participatory culture*, platforms contribute to the development of a society that is less dependent on legacy institutions. The central issue addressed in this book is how public values and sectorial activities are shaped by platforms nowadays. According to the authors, the accountability for a balanced platform society is held by three major categories of actors: corporations, governments, and the civil society.

Platforms are *programmable architecture designed to organize interactions between users* (p.9). They build ecosystems as *an assemblage of networked platforms, governed by a particular set of mechanisms* (p. 4). Platforms leave the impression that they are neutral. The authors of the present book have a strong argumentation against this idea: *platforms are neither neutral nor value-free constructs; they come with specific norms and values inscribed in their architectures* (p.3). On the one hand, platforms have the ability and the power to make certain issues visible for certain audiences and on the other hand, the ability to bury them and make them unknown for other audiences. However, in order to understand the algorithmic filtering process, one must take a deeper look at the way platform technologies work, at the economic models applied by platforms and at user practices related to platforms. These mechanisms end up shaping behaviors and values within our societies.

According to the present book, there are three different aspects that define platform mechanisms: *datafication* (data structures, algorithms, interfaces), *commodification* (commercial strategies) and *selection* (user practices).

Datafication is described as the ability and the common practice of networked platforms to transform any kind of information into quantified data. *Datafication* applies to behavioral data (likes, shares, interactions, follows and so on) and to any form of user interaction. Everything can be quantified in a platform society. Data represents a prime resource for platforms, which develop techniques for predictive behavior and real-time analytics. These are valuable attributes, especially when it comes to targeted advertising. Moreover, social platforms not

* Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca (Romania), balaban@fspac.ro.

only collect this data, but also circulate it through APIs (application programming interfaces). Therefore, third-parties can access more or less of this data, depending on their interest and agreements. In a platform ecosystem emotions or behaviors are triggered in order to generate certain reactions from users.

Commodification is the process platforms use to transform online (and even offline) objects, activities, emotions or ideas into tradable commodities. The user becomes a *product*, his or her generated data being sold to third-parties. These commodities are valued through four different currencies: attention, data, users, and money.

Platform *selection* refers to the ways in which social platforms filter or trigger the activity of the users through interfaces and algorithms. By interacting with these coded environments, users can also influence the online visibility of a particular subject. There are ongoing selection processes making topics or offers relevant for each user. Online platforms have revolutionized the way selection is made, replacing expert-based selections with user-driven and algorithm-driven ones (through rating, searching, following and so on). There are three types of selection that occur on social platforms: personalization, reputation and trends, and moderation. Personalization depends on predictive analytics built from collected data and it is user-oriented; personalization generates personalized content, based on the previous behavior of a certain user. Reputation (trends) does not refer, as most people believe, to most shared content, but rather to an algorithmic selection of the content that generates the largest increase in user engagement, in a certain period of time. Last but not least, moderation refers to the way platform owners moderate the content available on these social platforms and who engages with what type of content. There are many debates about the degree of moderation that is used on these platforms, some claiming that owners moderate way too much, while others believe content should be more or better moderated.

The authors distinguish between two types of platforms: the *infrastructural platforms* and the *sectorial platforms*. The *infrastructural platforms* are usually operated by the so called Big Five (the largest tech companies worldwide: Alphabet Google Inc., Amazon Inc., Apple Inc., Facebook Inc., Microsoft Inc.), as *they form the heart of the ecosystem upon which many other platforms and apps can be built* (p. 13). Sectorial platforms *offer digital services for one specific sector, such as health, retail or transportation* (p. 16). Four chapters deal with sectorial platforms.

One of the first fields that has undergone changes over the last years is journalism. The platformization of news has involved the interaction of multiple actors, such as the platforms, news organization, advertisers, users and it has made a great impact on professional journalism, both good and bad.

As social media has turned into one of the major sources of information for many people around the world, online audience metrics have become more and more relevant. News aggregators emerged and finally a hybrid model including editorial-driven and data-driven news production was adopted by many publications. The barrier between journalistic and advertising productions is no longer that visible. There are two types of commodification strategies that are relevant to the news production field: native and networked. Most news organization have chosen networked strategies, although they have started trying a mix of both.

Although urban transport is largely a market sector, it has considerable public relevance. Moreover, to ensure the quality of services, local governments regulate frameworks within which businesses provide their services. Furthermore, local governments also offer subsidies for infrastructures and organizational structures for public transportation. Having these reg-

ulatory frameworks guarantees a number of public values pertaining to the quality of public transport, such as consumer protection, consumer safety, inclusiveness, meaning transport should be accessible to anyone, for example passengers with disabilities, universal service provision, which refers to the fact that all areas should be serviced, and affordability.

New platforms for urban transportation arose in the mid-2010s and they contributed to an increase in the mobility options of consumers. The platforms introduced bike-, car-, and ride-sharing schemes and new apps, which have widened the available options and eased navigation.

Transportation platforms have become extremely attractive to consumers due to their ease of use, combined with their competitive pricing in comparison with legacy companies. These competitive prices come from the structural undercutting of various regulations. The rise of such platforms and other integrated transport services creates new relations between connective platforms and the complementors (drivers in this case) that provide the actual transport services. *Datafication* plays an important role in the platformization of transport. With the help of digital technologies, available cars, drivers, their position and current traffic conditions, transportation needs can be turned into datafied information. An advantage of these platforms is the lower transaction costs.

Datafication concerns all transport, be it public or private, and the result is that urban transport offerings are increasingly organized and accessed through the same platforms. This renders them as part of a single ecosystem and contributes to a process of commensuration.

Platformization is paving the way for new ways of organizing urban transport, based on *datafication*. This process could result in an urban transport system that offers high-quality services that are inclusive, affordable, comprehensive and easy to use. However, the most important question is: *who will govern urban transport in the platform society and based on what values?* Furthermore, one can address labor issues. *Platformization* can lead to the rise of new classes of laborers, who have limited rights and cannot claim the provisions of the welfare states. A famous example is Uber, who claims their drivers are not employees, but they are not entrepreneurs in the traditional sense, either.

With respect to the *platformization* of the healthcare and health research sector, the main question that was addressed by the book authors is whether these platforms truly serve the public interest and the greater good or they are simply a means of generating income from their users. Healthcare platforms range from personal fitness apps to health- or sickness-related apps that are used by patients, doctors, and researchers.

The main concern that emerges from this subject is whether users of these apps should be concerned for their privacy or they should accept that sharing personal data is beneficial as they receive personalized medical advice. Furthermore, another relevant question is whether corporate owners should make data private or they should make it accessible in order to contribute to public research.

Another important aspect of this debate is seeing who owns the user-generated data, who benefits and in what way health platforms are regulated by governments. Currently, health platforms run in a gray area of nationally varying regulatory regimes. These regulations focus on oversight, accuracy and the security of personalized healthcare apps but overlook aspects such as the privatization of health services and the access to health data for all researchers.

The purpose of many health apps is to request and collect all types of health and personal information from users. What motivates users to share their data is primarily the promise of personal gain – expressed through offering personalized solutions to their medical challenges (a healthier lifestyle, a diagnosis, a monitoring device) as well as the promise of pub-

lic benefit – sharing their data will contribute to the greater common good (improving public health, generating an audience, helping research). As a final note of this chapter, the authors suggest that healthcare policymakers at the international level should come up with a shared policy and regulatory framework that will safeguard the personal information, will limit the business exploitations while enabling the use of data for health research.

Education, one of the most precious common goods and the backbone of Western democracies (p.117) is also subject to the transformation of society as education platforms offering MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses) emerged as part of the connective ecosystem. High-tech companies developed platform-based toolsets that intervened in the core business of teaching: *content production and distribution, student performance tracking, class communication, and administrative organization* (p. 119). *Datafication* has implications in changing the curricula for all levels of education. *Commodification* represents the monetization of content and data flow via platforms. These developments raise social, ethical and normative questions regarding what kind of education our society wants to implement in the future.

The last chapter of the book is an invitation to a responsible governance of the platform society. With respect to the online world the values that our society is encouraged to adopt would be the control of personal data, quality and accessibility to information, comprehensiveness, affordability, responsibility, principles of equality, inclusiveness and a fair treatment.

From the normative perspective, data should be seen as a valuable resource supplied by common users, which is neither equaled to personal property nor is it a collective resource. Yet, the common practice of the platforms is to capture, store and sell any type of data without any compensation to the mass. The bitter reality observed by the authors is that the online side of the world is getting less and less transparent every day. The way big and successful platforms deal with and manage the transparency of their companies and actions has been thoroughly discussed and debated in recent times. Also, the selection processes should be more transparent to the public.

Besides the market (businesses, entrepreneurs, consumers, global corporations) several actors are responsible and have the power to contribute to responsible platform governance: the civil society (citizens, cooperatives, collectives, non-governmental organizations) and the state (local governments, national governments, supranational governments). In order to develop a democratic and sustainable platform society, the business community *needs to put long-term public value creation over short-term economic gain* (p. 147). Individuals have no power over platforms, but the collective protest does. Putting pressure on advertisers *appears a more effective strategy because platforms like Facebook and Google are remarkably vulnerable to negative publicity* (p.151). According to the perspective of the authors, a government has three attributes: it can be a regulator (proposing limitations, negotiating values, submitting laws), it can be a user (the institution selects platforms to work with just like any other individual) and it can be a developer (governments may build several digital services in order to make the life of its citizens easier).

The book is an invitation to reflect on the current situation of our society, in which every person should be aware of the fact that, usually, technology is the one shaping the development of a society. Nevertheless, the current ecosystem is not self-driving and it can be changed.