

Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy, **Platforms and Cultural Production**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2021, 260 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

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Platforms and Cultural Production, by Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy, emerges as critical for the very fact that it has explored the changing dynamic between digital platforms and cultural production. The book is particularly important in an era when digital platforms have ceased to be mere media of communication but are powerful shapers of cultural norms and creative practices. The authors set out to explore this complex, multifaceted subject and provide insightful analysis and critique relevant to scholars, researchers, as well as students in the fields of media studies, communication, and digital culture.

In the introduction, the authors begin with a question of concepts related to platformization and cultural production. They described platformization as a heterogeneous concept characterized by both continuity and break from previously established economic models and strategies. Therefore, this means enormous institutional mobilization with significant consequences on hierarchies of power. Also, the authors point out that the platformization generates a series of changes in the dynamics of power, including unfair deployment of economic and infrastructural powers.

One of the book's strengths lies in relating the idea of platformization to studies in the cultural industry. With this, the authors show that platformization is considered a changing process rather than just digitized accessibility. A crucial assertion in this view, therefore, is that platforms become actors who command the power of data flow and visibility, which involves significant consolidation of influence within the cultural sector. The authors underscore ways that digital platforms influence various critical stages in the process of production, encompassing cultural creation, distribution, marketing, and monetization. Thus, this book considers the wide-ranging effects of platform-driven transformations on "the democratic character of cultural production and the distribution of power in the cultural field" (p. 4). Additionally, the authors argue that rather than yielding one uniform global experience of platformization, the ramifications of platformization in one part of the world are often not the same in another region due to often overlooked differences in culture, economics, and regulation. For example, in certain countries with strong local media industries and cultural policies, the dominance of major platforms such as Facebook or YouTube might be mitigated by local platforms or initiatives, whereas in other countries with more underdeveloped infrastructures, or weaker cultural policies, the domination of major platforms can be more pronounced and have significant implications for local cultural production and diversity.

In the next section, the authors explore the intricate relationship between cultural markets and platform companies functioning as actors in cultural production and distribution contexts. The authors give



relevant examples that illustrate not only the extent to which the cultural producers are dependent on the platforms but also how the platform itself plays a dual role of both empowering as well as limiting these producers. They talk about Zynga, a video game developer known for creating social and mobile games, and its interaction with Facebook.¹ This is a good example of how increasingly cultural producers depend on the platforms for the distribution and marketing of their products. The need to maintain constant interaction and an ongoing relationship with users on the platform, an understanding of the dynamics of the platform, user behavior, and monetization strategies as part of digital ecosystems are what form the core of Zynga's case.

The authors then turn to the infrastructure of platforms and its implications for cultural production. They effectively argue that platform infrastructures, as opposed to traditional public infrastructures, are not free, common public goods. The other highlight worth noting is the aspect of autonomy and control in the landscape of digital creative work. Indeed, the book analyzes the way that the conditions platforms set for engagement (content guidelines, monetization rules, algorithmic visibility and rankings) are such that producers need to create for and with the platform—that is, through the lens of the platform's rules. The authors demonstrate how platform rules and algorithms act as governance mechanisms that deeply influence creation. For instance, the rules inscribed in the guidelines for content creation can push creators to self-censor to avoid demonetization or other penalties on the part of the platforms, and the algorithms that control the distribution and recommendation of content might force creators to tweak their creations according to what works best to be matched with what the platform's algorithm deems suitable. As a result, creators need to balance the demands of a platform's algorithms and monetization policies, which typically reward content with the broadest commercial appeal, against maintaining their distinct artistic brand and creative autonomy. This analysis is crucial to understanding how platforms shape and indeed can dictate—albeit subtly—creative inventiveness and the rich ways in which digital platforms may give a certain tenor to cultural narratives.

The book also emphasizes the interplay between algorithms and human judgments in shaping content visibility. Algorithms are designed to analyze vast amounts of data to determine what content is likely to be engaging or relevant to users. However, the authors state, these algorithms are not infallible and often reflect the biases of their creators. As a result, certain types of content can be unfairly prioritized or demoted. In sum, this section examines and analyzes the complexities of the roles played by various factors, including algorithms, human judgments, and biases, in shaping the visibility of content. By doing so, it sheds light on how digital platforms can both enable and inhibit the activities of cultural practitioners.

Additionally, the authors' analysis of platform governance in this part is interesting. Classifying governance under "Regulation, Curation, and Moderation" articulates a clear conceptualization of how platforms seek to govern cultural regulation. As with much the same phenomenon on a host of platforms, the shift from manual editorial selection to algorithmic curation would seem clear in many venues—a convincing example of how platform authority congeals, influencing both the availability of the content as well as perceptions and consumption. One of the interesting parts of this book has been the forays into differences between hosts and editors, which bring to light an important issue at stake about who is

¹ The company previously known as Facebook has rebranded itself as Meta in 2022.

responsible for user-generated content. The book points out how the platforms have utilized legal provisions like the “safe harbor” exemption to shelter themselves and claim control over their environments.

In the next section, the authors provide crucial analysis of platform-dependent cultural production about labor practices that are necessary to power such platforms. The authors critically examine the various implications of power dynamics that emerge from platform-dependent cultural visibility, highlighting issues of inequality and the impact on democratic practices. They argue that the algorithms and policies of digital platforms not only dictate what content becomes visible and popular but also inherently influence who gets to participate in the cultural conversation. The authors also touch on the challenges faced by the creators due to the line of contention drawn between creativity and the economic and business aspects of producing and distributing content on digital platforms. The authors argue how the reliance on metrics like views, likes, and shares to gauge success and visibility in the digital space can exert immense pressure on creators. This emphasis on quantifiable performance metrics can lead to a constant state of anxiety among creators.

Other scholars have considered the economic and power relations of digital platforms (e.g., *Platform Capitalism* by Nick Srnicek, 2017). *Platforms and Cultural Production*, on the other hand, focused more on cultural issues than the broader economic ones that others have already expounded on. Among the several interesting features of this book was its critique of how digital platforms are commonly romanticized as democratizing instruments. This was done by showing how platforms can reinforce existing power relations, contribute to labor precarity, and produce commodification of creative practices. Such critique is relevant considering the current status of the digital world where the power relations of platformization generally go unchallenged. This form of critique provides another narrative dimension to the story about platforms—one that supplements and provides complexity to our understanding. In the last section, the authors take up persisting inequalities despite the possibility of greater diversity and talent stimulation through increased digital platforms. It has been seen how gendered and racial divisions of labor have remained and how discrimination also persists in such industries.

Overall, *Platforms and Cultural Production* introduces itself as an essential addition to the field of platform and cultural studies. Providing a nuanced account of the role that digital platforms play in shaping the cultural landscape, the book challenges dominant narratives both in academia and policy circles and will encourage readers to critically reflect on the implications of platformization. It gives a lens through which to speak about continuing transformations in cultural production and valuable insight for understanding the broader implications in society and culture from digital technology. Hence, this book is a must-read for academics and scholars involving a comprehensive and thoughtful perspective on this subject of growing importance.

Reference

Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism*. Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons.