Van Dijk, Poell, and de Wall, The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World (2018)

Batuhan Keskin
Izmir University of Economics, Turkey

Van Dijk, Poell, and de Wall, The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World (2018)

Markets, Globalization & Development Review

Istanbul	Copenhagen	Tokyo
San Salvador	Moscow	Jakarta
Warsaw	Santiago	Cairo
Abu Dhabi	Tegucigalpa	Zagreb
Delhi	Karachi	Hong Kong

Book Review

Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal, The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World (2018)

Today, we are slowly coming to terms with the fact that online platforms are practically becoming more effective then public institutions in organizing and structuring our public and private lives. Even though public institutions and governments still formally represent the will of the people, civil lives, and in some instances, even public policies are structured through everyday operations and economic modalities of online platforms. José Van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martjin de Waal's The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World is one of these 'coming to terms' efforts on the academic front, it aims to analyze and contextualize the social transformations brought about by online platforms at a larger scale, from a global perspective. In the book, the term 'Platform Society' is used in reference to a social life in which social and economic flows are increasingly modulated by a globalized ecosystem of online platforms that is driven by algorithms and fueled by data. In this sense, the term platform society does not indicate a new kind of virtual public space that is separate and apart from the actual world we live in. On the contrary, the authors state that platforms are now situated at the heart of our lives and we are increasingly feeling their impact on almost all forms of everyday practices.

At this point, it is necessary to explain why the authors make use of Nick Srnicek's critical diagnosis, albeit with their particular revisions, and suggest to conceptualize the platforms as an *ecosystem* (Srnicek 2016). They point to the fact that the platforms are not stand-alone 'sites' or simple facilitators, but they are strongly connected to each other, and *platform capitalism* can only be analyzed as a form as such by considering their interactions and interdependency, just as in a biological ecosystem. According to the authors: A *platform ecosystem* is the combination of networked platforms, administrated by a particular set of mechanisms that shapes everyday practices which transform the social order and the way the societies are organized.

The authors claim that the platforms are technological, economic and social cultural configurations, rather than being merely technical devices that facilitate various kinds of user interactions. They describe the *platform* as a programmable digital architecture designed to organize interactions between users and suggest two categorical types: *infrastructural and*

sectoral. According to them the majority of infrastructural platforms, are owned and operated by *the Big Five* (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, which are altogether abbreviated as 'GAFAM'), and provide the structural backbone of the platform ecosystem upon which many platforms and applications can be established. Infrastructural services include search engines and browsers, data servers and cloud computing, email, ad networks, social networks, app stores, payment systems, identification services, geographical information and navigation services etc. *Sectoral platforms* seamlessly integrate into this structural backbone, and cater to a specific sector or niche, such as news, transportation, finance and hospitality. These can be exemplified as Yahoo News, Uber, Coursera, and Airbnb. Some of these platforms do not have tangible assets or sector-specific employees, and do not provide concrete products, content or services - such as Booking.com; they merely connect individual users to single providers.

Despite operationally delineating these two forms, Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018) suggest that "the difference between infrastructural and sectoral platforms is not fixed or determined and there is a constant dynamic between them that leads to integration'' (p. 45). The authors present us with the fact that the infrastructural platforms which are owned and operated by the Big Five companies have also became major operators of sectoral platforms through various kinds of alliances such as ownerships, relations, partnerships and they penetrate every domain of social and economic life, regardless of the nature of the domain (whether it is a commercial sector, private sector, government sector, non-public or nonprofit sector) while bypassing local and national institutions.

So how do these Big Five companies, their subsidiaries, their symbionts and other interconnected devices in such an ecosystem govern the society through their platforms? How do the platforms work? Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal identify three main mechanisms that are shared by all the platforms in this ecosystem, which represent crucial processes for their operations; *datafication*, *commodification* and *selection*. According to the authors, *datafication* refers to every activity that is translated into data and that can be processed by algorithms into new kinds of social and economic value - not only discretely quantifiable interactions (such as what you buy) but also their semantic contexts and relations (what you like, or even, *may* like). The authors deploy the concept of c*ommodification* to refer to the platforms' ability to transform "online and offline objects, activities, emotions, and ideas into tradable commodities" (pp. 85-86), and it is the key to the governance and business models of platforms. *Selection* is defined in the book as "the ability of platforms to trigger and filter user activity

through interfaces and algorithms, while users, through their interaction with these coded environments, influence the online visibility and availability of particular content, services, and people'' (p. 83). Platforms substitute expert based selections (such as the places to stay while on vacation advised by a travel guide) with user-driven or algorithmic selection processes, and regulate the users' activities by selecting or curating "most relevant topics, terms, actors, objects, offers, services, etc." (p. 83).

By analyzing these three processes, Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal elaborate on four important sectors where public and private interests are at play; *news media*, *urban transport*, *health* and *education*. Their analysis reveal that the Big Five companies infiltrate and penetrate all of these sectors and tend to act as gatekeepers to almost all social, economic, and cultural activities - including our personal economic spheres. Thus, the authors maintain that 'platform society' emerges as a global social form that is dependent on these infrastructural platforms.

Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal argue that although large platforms, particularly those wielded by the Big Five tech companies, may dominate the ecosystem, they are not the only players. They emphasize that the platform ecosystem is not only open to new formations - such as the incorporation of traditional media outlets into platforms, or the exploitation of the platforms' datafication, commodification and selection capacities by political interests (as the Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed) - but it is also composed of a multitude of agencies - such as individual entrepreneurs, governments, incumbent enterprises, cooperatives, citizens and consumers from various social classes. Yet, these actors' inclinations to protect their own interests instead of protecting civil values and public interests at large cause conflicts among themselves, which ultimately hinder these platforms' potential for social, economic, and political influence.

The authors point out that the users are usually concerned with safety, transparency, accuracy and privacy issues in their relation to the platforms. They wish their connections to be secure, they desire to know how the information they receive is being collected, they want that information to be accurate, and in return, they demand the information they disclose to the platforms to remain private. However, Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal assert that there are other sets of values, such as public good, fairness, social responsibility and democratic control, which become harder to protect in the platform society, since such values are neither integral to the economic logic of the platforms, nor can they be inscribed into the algorithmic processes they operate through. This stands out as the fundamental question the book intends to address: How can we protect such collective interests and public values in the platform society? Who will

be responsible for a fair, democratic and responsible platform society, if the platform remains as the governing socio-economic modality for the foreseeable future?

Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal point to the traditional constituents of liberal democracy when identifying the actors still responsible for maintaining the public good and political order in the platform society: the *Market actors* such as companies, micro-entrepreneurs, businesses, large and small companies; *State institutions* such as local governments, national government and supranational governments; and *Civil society institutions* such as citizens, cooperatives, collectives, nongovernmental organizations. According to the authors, a balanced platform society requires all these actors to play their roles in its construction. Yet, they assign the governments a further specific responsibility for being able to maintain their regulatory power in this new social form. Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal argue that the governments urgently need to upgrade regulatory institutions and they need to protect public values by negotiating public interest with platform owners.

Their argument reflect the common resentment that has become apparent in public debate, fueled by the proliferation of media coverage on such issues as Uber's aggressive and highly exploitative business practices or Cambridge Analytica's exploitation of users' private data towards political goals. A recent commentary in support of the authors' argument, that the governments should be able to exercise regulatory power over the platforms, points to how things could be different, for example, if the subsidiaries of Alphabet corporation could be legally forced to split into different companies as a result of an anti-trust inquiry, or even, if Google could be classified as a 'utility' in legal terms. The Guardian commentator John Harris argues that, if Google had been legally defined as a 'public utility', which would not be unreasonable considering its operational scale and socio-economic functions, "it would be forced to allow open access to both its key algorithms and data sets, just as the US telecoms giant AT&T once gave up a range of its precious patents in return for its monopoly" (Harris 2019).

Yet, so far, the platforms seem to have an upper hand in negotiating with public authorities of local and national scale. They represent massive information gathering capacities, which could be tapped into by government agencies in continuous surveillance operations or at times of political crisis and authoritarian interventions. Their global operational scale makes them elusive for regulatory mechanisms of national scale. The economic influence they represent provide them with bargaining power against the local authorities seeking tax revenues and employment opportunities. An

example might be Amazon's recent manipulative campaign for choosing itself a second headquarter outside of Seattle (Matsakis 2018; Streitfeld 2018). Moreover, the global reach of the platforms provide the countries they originate from with cultural, economic and political advantages in the international competition. For example, the Russian Facebook alternative VKontakte is ranked 20th in Alexa's global Top 500 sites as of January 2019 (see Alexa Internet's "Vk.com Site Traffic Statistics" 2019), and has over 500 million users globally (see Vk.com's "List of VK Users" 2018) On a similar note "China's Alibaba has become the world's largest retailer with online sales and profits having already surpassed all US retailers combined since 2015 including Amazon and eBay" (Cheng 2017).

While, due to their economic powers and influences, regulating the platforms for the benefit of public good appears to be an uphill battle under current conditions, it seems that this will be one undertaking that will shape our foreseeable future.

References

Cheng, Allen T. (2017), "Alibaba vs. The World'', Instutional Investor, July 25, [available at https://goo.gl/9BDqEp]

Harris, John (2019), "Together we can thwart the big-tech data grab. Here's how", The Guardian, January 7, (accessed January 15, 2019) [available at https://goo.gl/tVUrMM]

"List of Vk Users", Vk.com, (accessed 8 March 2018), [available at https://vk.com/catalog.php]

Matsakis, Louise (2018), "Amazon's HQ2 Hunger Games Are Over, and Jeff Bezos Won'', Wired Magazine, November 13, (accessed January 3, 2019) [available at https://goo.gl/AJq2bU]

Srnicek, Nick (2016), *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press.

Streitfeld, David (2018), "Was Amazon's Headquarters Contest a Bait and Switch? Critics Say Yes'', The New York Times, November 6, (accessed December 14, 2018) [available at https://goo.gl/8tKypU]

Van Dijck, José, Thomas Poell and Martjin de Waal (2018), *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. Oxford University Press

"Vk.com Site Traffic Statistics", Alexa Internet, (accessed January 7, 2019), [available at https://goo.gl/5qE36y]