



The platformization of cultural labour

Description

“Platform” is a handy architectural metaphor. In a seminal article from 2010, Tarleton Gillespie reveals the architectural origins of the term.

“In this sense ‘platform’ has been broadly used to describe human-built or naturally formed physical structures, whether generic or dedicated to a specific use: subway and train platforms, Olympic diving platforms, deep-sea oil rig platforms, platform shoes” (349).

Platforms are not as secure as the ground, or foundations. Platforms are often erected on frames, and won’t bear the same loads as levelled ground, bridges, compacted landfill or concourses. But you can place and construct things on top of platforms, e.g. chairs, lecterns, canopies, stage sets, ladders, billboards, scaffolding, and of course other platforms.



Platforms aren’t so important in themselves, but they provide access to other places, and other things can be built on them. It’s that sense of enablement that translates to the digital realm.

Gillespie’s 2010 article refers specifically to YouTube as a platform that allows people to upload, display and share video content. The YouTube platform provides opportunities for the creative output (user-generated content – UGC) of people other than the platform provider.

Gillespie refers to lesser-known platforms, “that are known only to commercial producers looking to stream their content, such as Brightcove, Castfire, Real Media’s Helix Media Delivery Platform and Comcast’s thePlatform service” (351). I had to look these up. Presumably there are also digital media platforms on which other platforms are built. Not all platforms are visible to every user.

Standing on platforms

Of course, *platform* has other connotations. Public speakers, some of whom are politicians, stand on platforms to raise themselves above the crowd to be seen and heard. Via the cunning work of metaphor and metonymy, the platform they *stand* on *stands* in for the policies for which they *stand*, i.e. the policies, manifestos, and promises become the political party’s *platform*.

The idea of a platform as defining a stance, a position, a view or an opinion infects the putative neutrality of the platform. Here there’s a nice contradiction to the idea of the platform that bedevils current conversations about social media.

Platform neutrality

On the one hand the idea of the platform suggests a value neutral and enabling medium on which anything can and should be able to happen. On the other hand, digital platforms embed and influence value systems, sometimes surreptitiously and without detection.

Their algorithms filter, rank search results, recommend content and by the platform’s marketing, branding and design encourage and discourage certain kinds of content. Vimeo encourages UGC from artists, designers and other professionals; Youtube encourages a wider constituency.

In his 2017 [update to the platform metaphor](#), Gillespie shows the widespread adoption of the platform idea, “extending it to services that broker the exchange not just of content or sociality but rides (Uber), apartments (Airbnb), and labor (TaskRabbit)” — in addition to video sharing (YouTube) and social media (Facebook).

The idea of the *platform* now really refers to a level within an infrastructure that manages revenue — profit for those who provide content for the platform, but especially those who develop and maintain the platform. Most platform revenue models link earnings in some way to the popularity, likeability and success of the product, i.e. content. That’s *platformization*.

Though we can think of operating systems (e.g. Unix), programming languages (e.g. Java, Python, PHP), data services (the cloud) and the Internet protocol (IP) as layers within computing infrastructures, they are not *platforms* in the sense now used by social media companies in their promotions. They are not revenue management systems. (I’m inferring that from Gillespie’s definitions.)

Platform limits

Controversy arises as the providers of social media platforms claim neutrality, which they think absolves them from responsibility for content, i.e. that UGC with only meagre purchase in the realms of quality and truthfulness.

Facebook refuses to call itself a media company, it is disavowing the kind of public and policy expectations imposed on media. They're merely a platform. In the meantime, they have each built up a complex apparatus of content moderation and user governance to enforce their own guidelines yet these interventions are opaque and overlooked.

The recent [announcement by Twitter CEO](#) to exclude political advertising from its platform is one response to the neutrality challenge.

Gillespie argues that the metaphor of the platform has reached its limits. The idea of the platform assumes

all activity is equally and meritocratically available, visible, public, and potentially viral. It does not prepare us, for example, for the ability of trolls to organize in private spaces and then swoop together as a brigade to harass users in a coordinated way, in places where the suddenness and publicness of the attack is a further form of harm.

Platforms have lost their innocence. See post: [Troll farming](#).

References

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1. Architecture

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1. platform
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