Book Review

Platforms and Cultural Production. Thomas Poell, David Nieborg and Brooke Erin Duffy.

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The study of 'platforms' within cultural production is a relatively under-explored area,

particularly at the intersection of consumer culture and cultural production. The rise of

widespread use of the internet during the 1990s inspired optimistic thinking around virtual

communities (Rheingold, 2000) and network sociality (Wittel, 2001) with possibilities

seemingly endless for online global connection and community. In terms of production, Chris

Anderson proposed that the internet facilitated a 'long tail' of online business and creativity

(Anderson, 2006) whereby opportunities to create and sell work and products, expanding

consumer choice more than ever before. These accounts were followed by more critical

work coinciding with the significant financial success of social media platforms such as

Facebook, with scholars such as Jarrett (2015) and Fuchs (2015) for example highlighting

how users of these sites inadvertently engage in unpaid labour and potential exploitation of

data to contribute to the accumulation of wealth of platform owners such as Mark

Zuckerberg. The book *Platforms and Cultural Production* (Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, 2022)

takes its lead from this critical work and develops a sustained examination of platforms from

two perspectives: institutions and cultural practices, focusing primarily on three industry

segments in which platforms have had a significant effect: social media, games, and news.

The terms 'social media' and 'platforms' can often be conflated, so the authors define

platforms as 'data infrastructures that facilitate, aggregate, monetize, and govern interactions

between end-users and content and service providers' (p.5) a definition from Poell et al

(2019). The authors also draw on Anne Helmond's concept of 'platformization', which can be understood as "the penetration of digital platforms' economic, infrastructural, and governmental extensions into the cultural industries, as well as the organization of cultural practices of labor, creativity and democracy around these platforms" (p.5). For readers of this journal, it is worth clarifying what the authors mean by 'cultural industries', which is, building on Hesmondhalgh (2019:15) the 'industrial production and circulation of texts' and broadly includes sectors such as broadcasting, film, music, publishing, journalism and games.

The book provides a much-needed contribution to studies on the role of platforms within cultural production, examining in detail how the relations between platforms and cultural producers take shape throughout various aspects of the production process – from creation, to distribution and marketing, to monetization. The concept of platformization helps to centre the role of the platform in cultural production, without veering into technological determinism. Instead, the authors note the continuities and changes of platformization in cultural production, particularly how platforms have intensified existing conditions, not least issues around inequalities and the precarity of cultural work which are well documented in cultural industries research (see Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Banks 2017; Brook et al 2020). Indeed, this book usefully brings together critical work on platforms and the cultural industries, as well as perspectives from media economics and critical political economy to provide a holistic account of contemporary cultural production and, to some extent, consumption. Of course cultural producers are consumers too, however this book focuses much more on production and institutions rather than end-users, an area of potential further research to build on what is set out by this book.

For researchers of consumer culture, the most interesting aspects of the book are in chapters 2 and 6. The introductory first chapter, which sets out the definitions and scope of the book as already discussed here, is followed by a chapter on Markets. The chapter

begins with the story of game studio Zynga, which distributed the popular 'Texas Hold'em Poker' game on Facebook in 2007. Zynga was able to capitalise on Facebook's rapid growth at the time by 'plugging in' to its existing infrastructure, exploiting the social relations among its users and collecting data. Popular games such as Farmville followed, which all engaged in aggressive marketing via Facebook, sending users regular push notifications and incentivising users for inviting friends to join the game. Facebook then changed their infrastructure to make this kind of aggressive marketing more difficult for the companies, until eventually these games were phased out of Facebook. The case of Zynga and Facebook is an example of the fraught relationship between platforms and 'complementors', which is a business studies term used to describe '"independent providers of complementary products to mutual customers" (McIntyre and Srinivasan, 2017:143)' (p.11). The success of complementors can depend entirely on a platform's structure and algorithms, which can change on a whim and thus intensify the precarity of cultural production. Platforms are distinct from 'legacy' industries such as large media conglomerates, the consumer electronics industries and telecommunications industries, which the authors point out make much more money than platform companies such as Google and Facebook. They instead understand platforms as 'mutli-sided markets' which are 'aggregators of institutional connections, including economic transactions, that mediate between end-users and content and service providers' (p.35). This means that unlike legacy media companies, platform companies tend to evolve continuously, with institutional relationships which are 'contingent and subject to continuous change (ibid). Where there are similarities with legacy media companies are the "winner takes all" dynamics, where despite the lowered barriers to entry for cultural production, very few cultural producers can make a lot of money from platforms. For example on YouTube, despite there being billions of videos and millions of producers, a small fraction of producers receive the vast majority of views and thus, revenue, and this is exacerbated by algorithms which push the content which is already popular to end users. The chapter usefully sets out the unique market dynamics of platforms, how consumers (or

end users) are imbricated in these processes, as well as the continuities with legacy media and technology companies.

The other chapter of interest for those researching consumer culture is Chapter 6, on Creativity, which is in the second part of the book focusing on cultural practices. The chapter explores in greater depth the relationship between platforms and creators through the concepts of nichification, metrification, branding and authenticity. These concepts frame how contemporary cultural producers go about their work and are characterised by four tensions: mass v niche; qualification v quantification; editorial v advertising and authenticity v self-promotion. These tensions are not new in creative work, instead they 'signal an intensification of long-term trends in the cultural industries, as well as the manifestation of broader economic and societal shifts' (p.139). Through a focus on online content creators such as YouTubers and Instagram influencers, the chapter highlights how producers create and distribute content, and manage their online presence to increase online metrics such as likes, views and sharing which all contribute to revenue generation. The chapter highlights the intensification of the long-standing 'creativity v commerce' tension characteristic of cultural work, and the integral role of platforms and consumers in the production process. These forms of production are distinct from 'legacy' media industries, as online creators experience relatively little economic security or institutional support, as highlighted in Chapter 5, on Labor. This chapter does a good job of highlighting the specific challenges of contemporary cultural production, noting how long-standing tensions have shifted or intensified through the process of platformization. Of particular interest to readers of this journal is how the relationships between consumers and producers in online content creation is almost instantaneous (particularly for streamers on sites such as Twitch) and thus producers engage in constant evaluation and re-evaluation of their content and presentation.

Though I have highlighted a couple of chapters which are particularly relevant for researchers of consumer culture, the book is worth reading in its entirety to get the full sense

of what the authors are ultimately trying to highlight – how power shifts and takes shape in all aspects of cultural production, and potential wider implications of this for inequalities and democracy. The rest of part one of the book focuses on Platform Infrastructures (Chapter 3) and Governance (Chapter 4). By platform infrastructures, the authors mean 'platform databases and networks, as well as the gateways, interfaces, tools, and associated documentation to access these systems.' (p.52). Chapter 3 describes the relationship between cultural producers and platform infrastructures, particularly how platforms shape and determine what can be produced and the implications for labour (for example learning new programming techniques, learning new social media platforms) and the implications for distribution and monetization. The power ultimately rests with platforms in these processes. Chapter 4 on governance unpacks these power dynamics a little more, focusing on two forms of governance – governance *by* platforms and governance *of* platforms. Governance by platforms refers to algorithms and processes of moderation and curation which determine the visibility of certain types of content above others. For example, in June 2020 TikTok was accused of algorithmically suppressing Black creators and content related to the Black Lives Matter movement. The authors highlight how producers are attempting to circumvent processes of regulation through 'algorithmic gaming', for example groups of people on Instagram getting together to share and amplify each other's work, otherwise known as 'Instagram pods'. This chapter leads nicely into the second part of the book on cultural practices, two chapters of which (5 and 6) I have already discussed. The third and final chapter in this part, Chapter 7 on Democracy, focuses on the central role of platforms during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. During that time information and misinformation about the virus easily spread on social media, and the shift to lockdown and home working meant that many became dependent on video calling platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The pandemic brought into sharp focus both the opportunities of platform-dependent working, but also its exacerbating inequality and precarity. For example, travel influencers who made money from posting Instagram photos from luxury destinations, suddenly had no income. This chapter revisits many of the book's previous arguments,

around algorithmic suppression, exacerbation of inequality and the precarity of cultural work, and the power of platforms. In a time when calls for social justice and equity are consistently dismissed by those in power as "woke", the power of platforms in regulating and moderating content, in a way which tends to 'veer to the conservative side of the equation' (p.170), has significant implications for democracy.

Throughout the book the authors make the convincing argument that platforms need to be taken seriously, and that much more needs to be done by researchers to dig deeper into all aspects of the platformization process. The book's focus on three industry sectors leaves room for further research across the cultural industries and across different geographical regions, particularly in the Global South. The authors' argument in Chapter 8 that 'platform visibility and inequality are intricately entangled on a societal level' (P.191) means that critical studies of platforms are urgently needed. They also point out that more studies need to be done on cultural producers themselves in a variety of contexts. I would also add that more research needs to be carried out on audiences and consumers in platform-based cultural production, because as O'Brien and Oakley (2015) argue, inequalities in cultural work are linked to who produces culture, who distributes it and who consumes it. This book primarily addresses two aspects of that triumvirate – production and distribution, and researchers in consumer culture would be well placed to address the third.

In conclusion, this is a very well written and engaging book which clearly lays out the critical issues of platform based cultural production. It is essential reading for any researchers and students interested in the politics of platforms and social media, contemporary cultural production and the role of platforms in consumer culture.

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