

Foreword: On Platforms—Three Approaches

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Media today live on platforms. Film and media studies are themselves informed by the platformed condition, as platforms—from Zoom to Google Docs—are the media *a priori* of research and experience in the current moment. Which begs the question: if understanding media today is to understand platforms, what are platforms? Or, better still, how have platforms been approached and how do the impressive contributions to this volume fit into these approaches to the platform problem? In this foreword I will briefly sketch out what I see as three distinct ways of approaching platforms as research objects, each of which has implications for how one situates platform research in geographically distinct milieus and in different media environments—reflecting the ambitions and provocations of the chapters in this book. In distinguishing these modalities of platform research I will also briefly situate how some of the contributions align with these different approaches.

The first approach moves from theory or definition to praxis, aiming to reduce the wide array of platforms to a set of principles, allowing the researcher to more easily adjudicate what is a platform, and what is not. This is the approach taken by Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy in their helpful methodological outline of platform research in their book *Platforms and Cultural Production*. There they define platforms as “data infrastructures that facilitate, aggregate, monetize, and govern interactions between end-users and content and service providers” (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022, 5). In framing them as mediators for third party transactions (a definition provided by the work of economists developing platform theory in the late 1990s and early 2000s), the authors explicitly exclude Netflix and other subscription video on demand (SVOD) services commonly framed as *and* written about as platforms—in trade literature, news media, and academic work. This has the upside of clarity, allowing researchers to focus

16 on what it means to research multisided market platforms and their impacts on cultural production in geographically distinct milieus. There is a certain utility in its circumscription and portability. The downside of this approach is that researchers take premade definitions to other geographies or milieus, rather than doing the difficult epistemological work of understanding what a platform means in a specific subnational, national or regional context, or within specific media or cultural industries. The advantages *and* hazards of this approach are especially evident in the work of Amanda Lotz, whose valuable conceptual and editorial contributions to global accounts of streaming platforms are accompanied by a normative definition of SVOD services based on US platforms.¹ While readers—and contributing researchers—benefit from Lotz’s emphasis on the global dimensions of streaming platforms, this approach misses out on the lessons from postcolonial theory and global media research that asks us to critically check assumptions that knowledge begins and ends in the Global North.

Nonetheless, research projects based on the clarity of definition offer scholars an “in” to approaching or indeed contrasting what falls inside or outside these definitions—as is evident in Sudipto Basu’s consideration of pirate networks as counterpoints to platforms, Colin Crawford’s analysis of the platformization of the home, and Jana Zündel’s analysis of the state of streaming platforms.

The second approach moves from praxis, field of usages, or discourse to theory. This approach aims to account for how

1 Symptomatic of this is the exclusion of Chinese streaming platforms in a recent co-authored article. “Chinese services iQIYI, Tencent Video, and Youku-Tudou are not included here, despite all of them ranking among the estimated seven most-subscribed services worldwide”—because “a clear stand-alone SVOD market does not exist in China, which makes comparison very difficult” (Lotz and Eklund 2023, 5). It is difficult to see how one can “go beyond Netflix” while at the same time using its business model as the measuring stick for other services.

platforms are described by industry movers and shakers, and what the social, political, media, or economic contours of these descriptions are. Descriptions in this case must be plural because there are inevitably multiple ways of invoking platforms. This is an approach taken, for instance, by Tarleton Gillespie in what might be considered the inaugural article of platform studies (Gillespie 2010), wherein he situates his approach of following the usage of the term by YouTube against claims that this usage is an abuse of the “real,” computational meaning of the term. (The idea that platforms begin and end with computers is, as I have shown elsewhere, a clear misnomer that erases the actual history of platform term and theory. Platforms start with cars, not computers (Steinberg 2022)). Beyond right or wrong, Gillespie’s approach productively and pragmatically prioritizes considering *why* the term is politically and economically useful for YouTube, such that it starts describing itself as one, at a particular moment in time. I adopt a similar approach in considering the lineage of platform writing in Japan, tracking the first uses of the term in relation to automobiles and then hardware chips within government and private white papers, management research, and later in the industry of mobile telephony and later streaming video (Steinberg 2019). Likewise Luzhou Li’s remarkable *Zoning China* offers an account of streaming video that emphasizes the distinct ways video operates in China, defined largely in part by inter and intraministry rivalries and turf wars that left online video relatively unregulated until around 2014 (Li 2019).

Becky Holt’s approach in this volume likewise focuses on platform rhetoric and imaginaries, focusing on “how people *think* a platform works, which is important for analyzing platforms as cultural and social objects.” The imagination of platforms and the limits placed on *our* imaginations by capitalist platforms is likewise the focus of Jake Pitre’s contribution. Sudipto Basu’s approach in this volume, while counter-posed to the normative elements of the platform, offers a definition based on praxis: “Platforms ... carry specific connotations of modular,

18 monetizing, expansionist, and ambient technological surrounds which mediate an increasing number of everyday activities.” This account is based on how platforms operate, rather than what they are, and leaning into the emphasis on platform experience or practical uses is equally found in the chapters by Anna Bell and Amrita Biswas. Countering the media industry emphasis in many accounts of platforms, they also offer a reminder that the specificity of the platform experience and *platform feeling* is also what makes platforms tick (Neves and Steinberg 2024; Lovink 2019; Alexander 2017). An approach from praxis to theory likewise forms the basis of the critique of an overreliance on assumed definitions of platforms in Alexandra Schneider, Haidee Wasson, and Yvonne Zimmermann’s historically grounded rejoinder to the very presumption about the novelty or even stability of the platform as term or object, including its ability to explain media. Their suggestion that “platforms as an object of study need to be localized” further offers strong support for this second approach that starts from praxis before moving to theory.

There is a third approach we might best define according to Thomas Lamarre’s term “platformativity” (Lamarre 2017); the ways platforms processually produce social relations.² Lamarre grounds his account in a critique of the methodological individualism of platform studies, which tends to presume a preexisting distinction between individual and society, and therefore cannot account for the move from one level to the other. Lamarre then shows how this blind spot in platform studies coincides with the nation-based model of Area Studies, which likewise traditionally presumed the self-contained and self-explanatory frame of nation to explain culture. Together they reinforce each other, allowing platform studies to continue hunting for yet another national context to focus on. Building on Rey Chow and Ani Maitra’s critique of the very formulation “media in Asia” (Maitra

2 I am grateful to Anna Bell’s contribution to this volume for reminding me to return to Lamarre’s work on platformativity—and take the liberty of quoting a section that her chapter drew my attention to.

and Chow 2015), Lamarre remarks that “the paradigm of ‘media in Asia’ treats the platform as a mobile object to which a series of static attributes or cultural qualities may be subjectively added” (Lamarre 2017, 289).

This attention to process could also help us be more attentive to the social surrounds of platforms—including what I have been thinking of as the *paraplatform*: the various media, objects, organizational structures, and social relations around platforms that are the condition for their operation (Steinberg 2024). This would be the platform version of the paratext, as deployed by Jonathan Gray (2010). Paraplatforms help constitute the conditions for how platforms work. For instance, Julie Chen and Ping Sun emphasize the importance of managing battery life for battery-powered scooters in China’s urban food delivery industry—resulting in a whole set of infrastructures (formal and informal) around battery-charging (Chen and Sun 2020), necessary for platform-mediated food delivery workers.

Such attention to the infrastructures and social consequences of platforms are visible in many of the interventions in this volume, including Sneha Kumar’s attention to the infrastructural support for AltBalaji’s “kinky entanglement of sex, data, infrastructure, and content”; Sam Thompson’s attention to social reproduction and the “media fix,” wherein platforms operate as care surrogates; Isadora Campregher Paiva’s attention to the IMDb database and subsequent adjunct platform to Amazon; and Philipp Dominik Keidl’s attention to the more classically paratextual elements within the making-of productions on Disney+.

There is of course a bleed across all of these approaches; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy base their definition of platforms on a thorough survey of the field that they themselves were instrumental in creating; and likewise Lotz. Clarity about what platforms are (and are not) comes from careful observation of platforms and reading across fields where the term is used. The second

20 approach that starts from a field likewise tends towards building definitions that then become sedimented themselves, requiring further challenge to loosen their hold—and their geographies—in order to better return to the localities from which the theory emerged in the first place. Here too the problem of what the field and localities are and how they are circumscribed in the first place also are a problem. And finally, the third approach's dictum to start from the middle in order *not* to presume the West as a geopolitical center or the platform as a settled object of study in order to "address the infra-individual intra-actions between platform and human, and individual and collective—a kind of performativity via platforms," (Lamarre 2017, 301) offers a productive way of returning to the importance of the action (including media operations) in the constitution of what might, if only in retrospect, be called the national, the social, the individual. And yet it too arguably sneaks a presumption (if not a definition) of what the platform *is*, as object, into its account of the platform activities of its users.

And so, whether starting from definition, from praxis, or from the processual middle, each approach ultimately benefits most from a critical dialogue with the other. And each also benefits from being put into practice, in critically examining platforms and their porous operations. This is precisely where I see the most important contributions of this volume. Each chapter productively engages with a different platform object, context, place, and problem, offering what is together one of the most intellectually robust and genuinely probing accounts of the platform condition today. The conversations they generate across chapters will carry on into the future—and indeed, *are* the futures of platform studies.

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