

Platform Capital vs. Public Mandate

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The idea of platform capitalism has been explored in recent years by a number of authors who are seeking to better understand the dynamics and flows within these technological systems. In his book *Platform Capitalism*, Nick Srnicek (2016) argues that platforms serve as powerful intermediaries in digital spaces to encourage two key functions: enhance social network effects to scale the user base and gather massive amounts of data regardless of its use value. Gillespie (2010) predicted that platforms would follow a similar growth trajectory as broadcast media in the U.S., demonstrating that technological regulation follows advancement rather than prefiguring it. This argument is not new; Raymond Williams argued that any new media technology, when permitted to outpace regulation and develop in an ad hoc manner, will seek privatization and avoid regulation for its survival rather than being implemented as intentional public resources (1974/2003).

In recent work, I examined platforms according to Mosco's (2009) theory of the political economy of communication and its three starting points: commodification, structuration, and spatialization. Commodification, according to Mosco, is the process of converting a product from its value in use to its value as a commodity for exchange; spatialization is the process of overcoming the restraints of space and time in social life through communication technologies; and structuration grapples with the way social life is configured in society and how interactions, whether through class and class relations or by various forms of agency in labor and production circles, are both influenced and determined by social configurations. In my work, I elaborated this model to explore control factors in each area. Commodification is subdivided into platform content control, audience control, and data control. Spatialization includes algorithmic control, temporal control, and infrastructural control. Structuration includes economic control, corporate/institutional control, and strategic control. By shifting the lens of analysis to a more actionable schematic, my hope is to bridge the concepts of political economy with the dynamics of platform control in the contemporary, algorithm-driven, individuated media environment.

In the platform capitalist system, the control of audience interactions — their habits, their modes of interaction, their binge watching, their endless scrolling through news feeds, even their desire for food delivery or on-demand transportation — is central to growth and shareholder profit through the processes of valuing aggregated data and personal information while locking users into a system. The value of the media commodity — the show, the film, the series, the blog post, the thread — is trivial when compared to the value of keeping audiences, viewers, and users locked into a system. Platforms tout their active user count and total user count as metrics that showcase power in the media marketplace and the capacity to maintain control over their platform.

In contrast, the National Film Board of Canada has quietly and steadily built a system for groundbreaking original film, documentary, animation, educational, and interactive media serving the public interest as mandated by national legislation. In their 2013-18 strategic plan (National Film Board of Canada, 2013), they support the production and distribution of media to present the authenticity of the Canadian experience.

Philosopher Charles Taylor's concept of "horizons of significance" takes a central role in their mission; the NFB sees itself as a space through which Canadian authenticity is expressed in all its complexities. Their work is available through their website nfb.ca and through broadcast and cable services in Canada, and they express their dedication to preservation and access as part of their central mission of serving the exchange of ideas and expression in the public sphere. In their strategic plan, they shift their focus from *platforms* — understood by them as a way to push content — to *digital spaces* where artistic and creative works can circulate through audiences. In other words, maintaining a web-based platform without a source of revenue is prohibitively expensive, but the cost of using existing systems of delivery such as app stores and media partnerships can be justified. When faced with yearly reductions in parliamentary budget allocation, the NFB continues to seek opportunities for revenue generation through freemium models in their apps, justification through key audience engagement metrics, and the growth of international partnerships for content distribution with China, Korea, Southeast Asia, and Latin America.

For the purposes of this roundtable discussion, I would like to take the opportunity to discuss the relative trivialization of media content in platform capital systems in contrast with content valued for its cultural and social exchange. When we consider cultural content in societies, how does the logic of platform capitalism contrast with the logic of the pluralistic cultural public mandate?

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