Policy Portal

Rethinking Platform Power

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Introduction
The relationship between platforms and power is becoming an increasingly important area of study across media and communication studies. Indeed, it was the focus of “Platforms and Power: A Panel Discussion” (Bannerman, Baade, Bivens, Shade, Shepherd, & Zeffiro, 2020) published in the Canadian Journal of Communications in 2020. In this response to “Platforms and Power,” I offer my own answer to a question originally posed to the panel: “what is pressing or timely about research on platforms and power right now?” (p. 474). I argue that so far, the political utility of platforms has been taken for granted in media and communication studies, and that the field might also attend to a nuanced analysis of the actual technicity of platforms. This analysis suggests that in considering platforms as technologies with their own sets of logics—logics that mediate the amplification and elevation of those who use them—we can better attend to important questions about the ways in which these powerful media objects extend power. Importantly, thinking about platforms as media objects reveals the relationship between platforms and the political potential for democratic public engagement and social justice.

Platform liberation
Andrea Zeffiro argues in “Platforms and Power” that we have to reconsider the idea that “platforms are inherently liberating” (Bannerman et al., 2020, p. 482). Zeffiro demonstrates that popular and dominant stories of platforms as liberatory are most often sold through the vision statements and manifestos of platform companies. Christina Baade also points to the early 2000s as time when there was a “great deal of optimism” (Bannerman et al., 2020, p. 483) about music platforms and their ability to liberate musicians from exploitation by record labels. I agree that as media and communication studies scholars critical of platforms and their power, we need to push back against the notion of platforms as liberatory. However, a utopian vision of platforms extends beyond more recent efforts by the tech industry to present digital platforms as democratizing (Bannerman et al., 2020; Gillespie, 2010).
Instead, platforms have long been framed as necessary for a kind of empowerment; they are spaces and places to amplify one’s voice, to have a speaking part in a narrative, and to display power—even in limited ways. In popular discourse, to be given a platform is synonymous with being given a voice. For instance, we often hear calls and accolades for celebrities and athletes who “use their platforms for good.” The construction of a platform as an authorizing, open, and empowering space certainly shaped (and continues to shape) the framing of digital media as liberatory. It is often imagined and argued that users are empowered by digital platforms as they afford users a voice by lowering barriers to participation.

We see, for example, the platform’s enduring legacy as liberatory in histories of the soapbox, which historically served as a platform that empowered its users with its relative ease of access and use. Since at least the early twentieth century, the practice of soapboxing has been an important social and political practice, used as an impromptu method of articulating politics to a crowd (May, 2013). Whether it be a wooden crate, a curb, a small stepladder, or even a freshly cut tree stump, the soapbox has always been a rudimentary media amenable to spontaneous oration. The soapbox as a technology for amplified oration became popular because it was accessible; it is a technology that was born out of the desire for marginal speakers to be heard. Soapbox media ushered in a new way of thinking about one’s authority to speak. So long as you had something to stand on, amplification was within your grasp.

This, of course, continues to be the underpinning logic of social media platforms and their assumed liberatory potential. Since 2011, when the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street used Facebook and Twitter, digital platforms have been celebrated because they supposedly make public participation more democratic (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Taylor, 2012). We see this too with the influx of feminist politics reliant on digital platforms, highlighted especially by the recent #MeToo movement (Banet Weiser, 2018; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018). Many communications theorists, including the “Platforms and Power” panelists, have been critical of the notion that social media platforms are democratizing (Bannerman et al., 2020; Carpentier, 2016; Casemajor, Couture, Delfin, Goerzen, & Delfanti, 2015; Gillespie, 2010; Taylor, 2012). I use the historical example of the soapbox, however, to suggest that it is not merely that platform firms simultaneously sell and limit the democratic potential of digital platforms but rather that the logics of platforms are long-standing.

**Platform elevation**

The term platform, then, is used to specifically refer to media that both literally and metaphorically raise, elevate, and amplify the people that use them. This includes digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, but it also includes material media objects such as stages and soapboxes (Singh, 2018; Singh & Sharma, 2019). Rena Bivens, in her response in “Platforms and Power” also suggests that,
“it is important, today, to attend to the different layers of software, and to explore how each layer structures identity differently and with shifting levels of visibility. As well, it is important to consider the range of platforms that exist today, including those that are not digital” (Bannerman et al., 2020, p. 477). This consideration of a constellation of platforms, both digital and analogue, makes legible their total effects.

Put simply, the underlying logic of platforms, is that, regardless of form, platforms are a very specific media that elevate and amplify. In attending to this logic, it is possible to see how platforms function as media that also organize the political and the social in very particular ways; the platform is a medium that elevates and amplifies some voices and renders particular ways of resisting legible. This too often translates into the elevating of only normative modes of resisting—only those modes of resisting that rely on the platform tend to register as resistance in the first place. We need to study platform power in a way that makes it possible to better understand why people, specifically those marked by race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability, might not want to be elevated by the platform. In considering the platform as a media object that structures the political, rather than as a series of discrete surfaces where political and economic life plays out, we can better attend to the limits of platform power. The following example shows how a shift in thinking might help us refocus our attention on different forms of platform power.

Platforms and the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol

The violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, illustrates how platforms continue to dominate social media studies scholarship. The insurrection, staged by Trump supporters called to action by the president himself via his Twitter account, stormed the Capitol building in an attempt to overturn the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Immediately, the role social media platforms played in the violent breaching of the Capitol building became evident through ongoing discussions of what it might mean to de-platform President Donald Trump and his supporters. Media and communications studies scholars who do vital work on platforms and their policies (Crawford & Lumby, 2013; Gillespie, 2018; Helberger, Pierson, & Poell, 2018; Roberts, 2019) have already begun identifying the need to focus on platforms’ content moderation policies, arguing that we should be worried about platform companies’ power to act as “gatekeepers to public discourse” (Jaffer, McGregor, Ong, Owen, Tworek, & Leonard, 2021). While these are significant concerns, they still leave questions about platforms, and their assumed political utility, unanswered.

Another platform (of sorts) from the Capitol insurrection provides a different angle for considering platform power. A now-viral image depicts an insurrectionist stealing the congressional house podium. A Trump supporter sporting a pom-pom toque with “TRUMP” scrolled across it smiles and waves for the camera while
carrying Nancy Pelosi’s lectern through the Capitol building. The fact that there was so much outcry from both the left and the right about this specific object being forcefully and shamelessly removed reveals a political investment in media objects that bestow the power to speak. We need to ask why, and if the right to speak publicly via the platform actually alters our material conditions. In other words, we need to return to the logics of the platform as media objects that elevate and amplify to consider how our investment in these media objects limit the potential for other forms of resistance and modes of living today.

The presence of the platform does the signifying work of democracy in action. It is a democratic veneer for the people, one that gestures toward the potential for social change. An elevated idea, phrase, thought, body, or slogan can be understood as the idea of democracy facilitated by the platform. What is pressing about research on platforms and power right now is a need to understand platforms as long-standing media devices that structure the social and the political. We must go under and behind the platform, and we need to recognize the organizing labour it requires of us. We must interrogate the politics of social reproduction embedded in the platform, the intertwining and oftentimes at-odds demands of care and visibility, and the uneven desires for legibility that are obscured by the actual medium of the platform.

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References


