



The Rise of Platforms:

Challenges, Tensions, and Critical Questions for Platform Governance

Report from the 2019 International Communication Association
post-conference, "*The Rise of Platforms*"

**Kirsten Adams
and Bridget Barrett**

*In collaboration with
Mike Miller & Cole Edick*

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About the Organizers

To analyze and document the role of platforms in shaping contemporary political, economic, and social life, a global and interdisciplinary group of scholars convened for a post-conference on May 29, 2019, at George Washington University following the International Communication Association's 2019 annual meeting.

The conference, titled “The Rise of Platforms: Individual, Institutional, and Governance Questions for Communication Research,” centered around identifying the key questions digital platforms present to communication research and adjacent fields such as political science, law, economics, and sociology, as well as the challenges of studying them. Although participants discussed a number of different issues at the post-conference, this report focuses on platform governance as a particularly salient and important theme. In addition to linking these discussions across subfields and disciplines, the conference sought to bring together researchers from different geographic and substantive areas to provide comparative analyses of platforms across economic, political, and social contexts.

The organizers of the conference were Erika Franklin Fowler (Wesleyan University), Sarah Anne Ganter (Simon Fraser University), Natali Helberger (University of Amsterdam), Dave Karpf (George Washington University), Daniel Kreiss (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Shannon McGregor (University of Utah), and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (University of Oxford).

The conference was cosponsored by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Media and Journalism, George Washington University's School of Media and Public Affairs, and the University of Amsterdam's Institute for Information Law. The Media & Democracy program (www.ssrc.org/programs/view/media-democracy/) at the Social Science Research Council also cosponsored the event, and program staff Mike Miller and Cole Edick provided invaluable input into the planning process. The Media & Democracy program encourages academic research, practitioner reflection, and public debate on all aspects of the close relationship between media and democracy.

This report was produced by Kirsten Adams and Bridget Barrett (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), in collaboration with Mike Miller and Cole Edick.

The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Social Science Research Council or the sponsors of the “Rise of Platforms” conference, unless directly stated otherwise.

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Introduction

“While Web 1.0 ended with a bang, Web 2.0 ended with a whimper.... What replaced the Web 2.0 era is what we now know as the Platform Era.”

–Dave Karpf, George Washington University, May 29, 2019, at the International Communication Association post-conference, “The Rise of Platforms”

A decade ago, the rise of social media around the globe appeared to herald a new age of technological utopianism in which politics would shift away from bureaucracy and hierarchy toward more decentralized modes of governance by a variety of digital communities.

But platforms have fallen short of this utopian vision—as illustrated, for instance, in their propensity to facilitate conspiracy theories, propaganda, hate speech, and fake news, from Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election and the UK Brexit referendum to Facebook’s role in the spread of anti-Rohingya propaganda in Myanmar.¹

And yet the companies that operate these platforms—ranging from the “digital giants” such as Facebook, Google, Amazon, and Alibaba to software companies such as NationBuilder and Optimizely, leading “sharing economy” firms such as Airbnb and Uber, and messaging applications such as Slack and WhatsApp—are more powerful than ever.² Platform companies have experienced significant growth over the past fifteen years, disrupting giant economic markets and becoming enmeshed in virtually every aspect of contemporary social and political life. A handful of companies now control large portions of the world’s social, political, and economic activity. These platforms have irrevocably changed the face of online commerce and political communication, and have become a central way that publics receive and engage with information.

As a result, *platform governance*—who makes, or *should* make, the decisions that shape user experience and behavior—has moved to the forefront of political, legal, and scholarly conversations about platforms in social and political life. Platform governance extends beyond the domain of government: volunteers, users, and platforms themselves also create policies and norms that shape behavior on platforms. Given the vast scale of platforms, this multipronged approach is necessary, but each of these actors brings a unique set of needs and challenges to bear on governance decisions: platform executives, volunteer-made moderator

¹ Paul Mozur, “A Genocide Incited on Facebook, with Posts from Myanmar’s Military,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>.

² Jialu Shan and Michael R. Wade, “The Digital Giants in 2018,” IMD website, June 2018, <https://www.imd.org/research-knowledge/articles/digital-giants-in-2018/>.

bots on Reddit, Facebook page owners, content moderation algorithms, and professional networks of content creators and YouTube account managers all have differing (and potentially conflicting) preferences for how platforms and their content are used and regulated.

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In the first section of this report, we highlight the complex challenges of platform governance discussed during the conference. In the second section, we outline the various tensions around governance that arise within platforms themselves and between platforms and their key stakeholders. In the final section of this report, we engage with critical questions motivating research about platforms and their increasingly central role in political and public life. We conclude with a list of recommended readings, reflecting conversations from this conference and the growing interdisciplinary body of work around this fast-developing field of research.

Challenges of Platform Regulation and Governance

Platforms now constitute a range of “sites and services that host, organize, and circulate users’ shared content or social exchanges for them; without having produced or commissioned [the majority of] that content; beneath that circulation, an infrastructure for processing that data (content, traces, patterns of social relations) for customer service and for profit.”³ As such, new and important challenges complicate how platforms’ affordances, practices, and policies interact with the external forces that shape them. Platforms are united in the fact that their success requires users to interact with and supply content to them; these diffused one-to-one and one-to-many interactions are what make governance particularly difficult.

Throughout the conference, panelists discussed the many challenges of regulating and, more generally, governing platforms. While governments can institute regulations enforceable through fines and other penalties, platform governance more broadly encompasses the ways that a variety of stakeholders and the platforms themselves are able to shape the norms and rules that determine or impact user behavior. Platform governance plays out in parliaments, federal agencies, and the meeting rooms of platform companies, as well as through the accounts of volunteer moderators and page owners.

The greatest challenges to platform governance identified at the conference were (1) determining who should have the authority to make governance decisions, (2) defining the behaviors that require governance solutions, (3) navigating the constant technological change associated with our current digital ecosystem, and (4) navigating considerations of free speech.

DELEGATING AUTHORITY: WHO GOVERNS PLATFORMS?

As illustrated by research presented at the conference, governance entails not just the decisions made by platforms and governments, but also the actions taken by the users of the platforms; at all levels of platform governance, these decisions are made through both human and algorithmic means. Users act as moderators in addition to content creators, both through reporting content back to the platform as well as through platform-sanctioned roles such as Facebook page administrators and subreddit moderators. And as algorithmic and artificial intelligence-powered moderation increases, governance decisions are made with varying levels of human involvement.

³ Tarleton Gillespie, (2017) “Regulation of and by Platforms,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, ed. Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick, and Thomas Poell (London: Sage Publications), 254–78.

Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk and Bente Kalsnes documented the lack of transparency within the processes of page-owner moderation on Facebook. Over the past few years, Facebook has been changing its newsfeed algorithm and interface to encourage interaction in groups. While the platform is open to the public, user interaction increasingly takes place in private spaces within it. The Facebook page owners interviewed by Ihlebæk and Kalsnes saw their roles as editorial in nature; not only did they write content for the pages, they also curated the comments and social interactions of their followers.

Reddit's entire platform is partitioned into subreddits, each with its own moderation team and rules. Lucas Wright studied "AutoModerator," a bot created by a Reddit user who later became an employee of the company. Now used across almost all subreddits, this bot has changed how the platform is governed, removing content with limited visibility and decreasing the interactions between subreddit participants and the moderators.

In addition to users and volunteers, platforms rely on artificial intelligence and algorithms for content moderation. Robyn Caplan's study of YouTube's decisions on when to demonetize videos and channels highlighted the tensions between serving viewers, content creators, and advertisers. YouTube has embraced automated means of identifying "advertiser-unfriendly content" as well as processes of adjudication. Caplan shows that these rules can be circumvented if the content creator has enough followers, a relationship with a YouTube account manager, or other industry relationships and economic power. While these social relationships can ameliorate algorithmically driven regulation of content, less-resourced content creators are left with the consequences of strict automated enforcement. For example, YouTube channels that dealt with LGBTQ+ issues were demonetized since YouTube's algorithm could not distinguish their content from prohibited sexual content. While unintended, YouTube's policies disproportionately impact under-resourced and under-represented users.

As platforms grow and test new ways of governing their content and their users, they will increasingly rely on both computer-aided decisions as well as the decisions of existing users. But while algorithmic biases are well-documented in the academic literature, the biases of volunteer moderators may deserve more attention. Moreover, as Caplan's research shows, we should be wary of depicting algorithms as neutral or sole arbiters of content: ultimately, as ever, there are distinct advantages to greater access to networks and resources, and moderation takes place within those existing networks.

DEFINING THE CHALLENGES OF PLATFORM GOVERNANCE

In order to address and regulate hate speech, harassment, fake news, and political advertising, platforms need adequate definitions of these concepts. Throughout the conference, discussions circled back to basic questions of how to conceptualize and measure the problematic behaviors and content.

Paddy Leerssen found that, in response to potential government regulation in multiple countries, Facebook and Google have adopted different answers to the basic question, "What is a political advertisement?" While

Facebook is attempting to archive and make publicly visible any ad that address “social issues, elections, or politics,”⁴ Google has limited its transparency project to “ads that feature a candidate running for political office, a current elected officeholder, or in parliamentary systems, a political party.”⁵ As Leerssen noted, these companies adopted their own definitions in part because there is not clear agreement in the regulatory community. The European Union’s Code of Practice on Disinformation (a self-regulatory agreement made between major online advertising platforms and the European Commission) asks that platforms “commit to use reasonable efforts towards devising approaches to publicly disclose ‘issue-based advertising.’”⁶ In the very next sentence, however, the code notes that “such efforts will include the development of a working definition of ‘issue-based advertising.’” In this way, governments have passed the responsibility of defining the terms to the platforms themselves.

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Defining hate speech and harassment is just as fraught. Although harassment is prohibited by most social media platforms, and hate speech and related behaviors have been banned on Facebook and Twitter, the ways these terms are conceptualized and operationalized is quite complicated. For example, Anna Reepschlager and Elizabeth Dubois found that platforms’ policies reflected their respective values: Facebook’s initial conceptualization of hate speech, free speech, and harassment focused on child protection and safety, while Reddit and Twitter more directly addressed the issue of free speech (though Reddit’s rationales were built on trust, safety, and being “anti-evil,” and Twitter’s were on healthy conversation and safety from abuse). These values and different conceptualizations of harassment play out in many policies. For instance, when addressing harassment of public figures, Reepschlager and Dubois found that Facebook’s and Twitter’s approaches are similar in that they don’t remove content that may be in the public interest, meaning that tweets and Facebook posts harassing public figures are unlikely to be removed. Reddit, alternatively, treats public figures like any other user; the platform has public figures go through the same process as other users to have content taken down and is no more or less likely to remove content due to a user’s celebrity status. These conceptualizations also seem to shift over time. Ultimately, platform policies on harassment and hate speech did not address the same issues in the same ways—or even address the same issues at all. Each platform harbors unique challenges, yet even basic definitions of problematic behavior diverge across platforms.

⁴ “Ads about Social Issues, Elections or Politics,” Facebook Business, <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/1838453822893854>.

⁵ “Transparency Report: Political Advertising on Google,” Google Transparency Report, <https://transparencyreport.google.com/political-ads/home>.

⁶ “Code of Practice on Disinformation,” European Commission website, September 26, 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/code-practice-disinformation>.

The goals of simple, accurate definitions and effective, uniform measures across platforms seem straightforward. However, discussions that followed the conference presentations problematized these goals as well. If the regulation of speech on platforms has taught us anything, it is that these problems are complicated and that solutions often bring new, unanticipated problems to the surface—for instance, the demonetization and filtering out of LGBTQ+ videos on YouTube when the company attempted to improve its moderation system for minors.⁷

Further, a solution to one group of actors may be a problem to another. Indeed, how participants conceptualized and understood democracy also influenced their views of how platforms could benefit or harm it: a belief that citizens are knowledgeable, well-meaning participants in the democratic process can lead to very different priorities for platforms than a belief that some or many citizens are ill-informed, often prejudiced, problematic actors within society.

As governments place the onus of governance on platforms themselves, one can easily see their abdication of responsibility as problematic—after all, without national or international laws creating norms and rules across platforms, the likelihood of compliance may be low and the likelihood of meaningful enforcement even lower. Yet coregulation is, in fact, common in complicated, specialized industries. While loose or contradictory definitions make regulation more difficult, they may also further the goals of learning what works and creating safer platforms that better serve democratic life.

CONSTANT CHANGE IN PLATFORMS: GOVERNING IN AN EMERGENT MILIEU

Platforms are not static entities. Their policies, affordances, and rationales can change incrementally or drastically, with no opportunity for users to meaningfully renegotiate their terms of use. Reepschlager and Dubois found that over the past fourteen years, platforms have published, revised, and moved their policies in their “terms of use,” “statement of rights and responsibilities,” “community standards,” “Twitter rules,” “user agreements,” and “content policy,” as well as in subsections of these larger buckets. Updates and official changes to these rules were also posted on blogs, on the platforms themselves (such as in newsfeeds and in subreddits), and in the legal documents users agree to when they sign up to use a platform.

But as Caplan’s examination of YouTube demonstrated, users (including advertisers) face great difficulty when navigating platforms’ changing content guidelines. Similarly, Ihlebæk and Kalsnes’s study of Facebook page moderators showed how fluctuation in moderation affordances affected page owners’ governance capabilities.

⁷ Sal Bardo, “YouTube Continues to Restrict LGBTQ Content,” *HuffPost*, January 16, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/youtube-continues-to-restrict-lgbtq-content_b_5a5e6628e4b03ed177016e90?

When platforms enter new arenas or change in meaningful ways, they can influence more than just users: they may also disrupt policy regimes. Katherine Reilly sought to understand when technological disruptions cause policy disruptions, which are struggles over governance. Through comparative work grounded in the “varieties of capitalism literature,” Reilly showed how different forms of capitalism shape the outcomes of policy disruptions, asking whether their resolution opens up space for market newcomers or entrenches existing inequalities.

Regulating platforms within a specific commercial context is a challenge, but anticipating regulatory responses to disruptions yet to come from peer-to-peer and peer-to-many technologies built on digital technologies will be even more difficult. Comparative research such as Reilly’s, which illustrates the context-specific nature of disruption, will be crucial for understanding the quality and scope of future disruptions.

THE CHALLENGES OF GOVERNING SPEECH ON PLATFORMS

This conference highlighted the need to understand the novel affordances of platforms that limit speech, which may not be obvious to casual observers or well-publicized by the platforms themselves. The complicated relationships between platforms, contracted third parties, and government in governing speech can make transparency in decision-making incredibly difficult to achieve. These new technological spaces for communication may require new legal frameworks in addition to creative applications of existing legal doctrine.

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Platform affordances have created new ways of restricting speech that are more complicated than simply banning or not banning users. Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk and Bente Kalsnes described how political parties used “shadowbanning” on their Facebook pages, and Lucas Wright found the same practice on Reddit by volunteer moderators. Shadowbanning is when moderators block a user from participating on a platform in such a way that the user cannot immediately tell that they have been banned. For example, the user may still see their own comments, but no other users can. Shadowbanning allows users to perceive their voices as heard and their speech as free when, in fact, it is not.

What does it mean to use such deception in platform governance, particularly in potentially democratic, deliberative spaces? The affordances platforms provide for governing both themselves and users create new problems of how to conceptualize speech and censorship; the consequences of these new ways of restricting speech are unclear.

Without clear processes for and transparency regarding governance decisions, platforms and hired third parties restrict speech without accountability to the public. Stefanie Fuchsloch, Tobias Gostomzyk, and

Jan Rensinghoff illustrated how Germany's Network Enforcement Act allows platforms to determine what is criminal fake news and remove it expediently or to contract this service out to vetted third parties. The ability to contract out this responsibility may lower the burden on platforms and make decisions for users more quickly, but it also introduces another set of actors that must be accounted for in transparency and accountability initiatives. While the platforms are required to publicly report how much content has been removed, the rationale behind removals is not transparent.

Amélie Pia Heldt proposed a new category of public forum, a social public forum, in order to protect speech on platforms while still allowing them to moderate content. While this proposal operates primarily in the US context, its theoretical underpinnings address international concerns as well. By bringing platforms into the fold of public forums, users would be granted more structured and transparent rights of due process. These requirements of documented due process could be applied to the transparency problems in the German Network Enforcement Act. Yet, while this level of transparency may be beneficial, the issue of who decides what is acceptable still stands.

The discussions surrounding common tactics used to moderate speech on platforms—such as blocking users, removing hate speech through algorithmic decisions, or alerting users to fake news—are vital, but do not address the broader challenges that these new technologies bring. The novel technological and economic structures of platforms, constantly changing and adapting, have continued to surface challenges to governing speech.

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MOVING FORWARD

The challenges of platform governance outlined here are not exhaustive. Nevertheless, they reflect a variety of concerns that were raised repeatedly throughout the conference. These discussions made it clear not only that there are no perfect fixes but also that these problems cannot be solved unilaterally by governments, by the platforms themselves, or by users—each of these stakeholders must be involved in the process.

Moving forward, research has to account for the messy, difficult, and sometimes opposing definitions of the issues at hand. Simultaneously, research cannot approach platforms as static entities: the constant changes within platforms' policies and affordances must be accounted for, and the implications of potential future changes must be acknowledged. When thinking about how to govern platforms, researchers should better identify those actors who should, *normatively*, have the authority as well as who does, *in practice*, have the authority to implement and enforce governance decisions. Contested definitions, constant change, and diverse actors all play a role in how speech is governed on platforms, creating a chaotic but increasingly urgent set of governance dilemmas.

Tensions in Platform Governance

In the Platform Era, we are beginning to see the inherent tensions between platforms as neutral, open intermediaries and as commercially owned, novel technologies. These tensions, which exist between platforms and their various stakeholders, raise important questions about how platforms can or should be governed, why certain decisions are made, and how people come to those decisions.

The key tensions identified at the conference concerned those (1) between platforms' economic interests and stakeholders' political interests and (2) around the use of platforms and their data. The tensions discussed here are not comprehensive, but they represent the variety of negotiations that have surfaced as platforms and their stakeholders navigate a field of governance that must necessarily involve multiple actors whose interests are often in conflict. Each topic highlights an area of disagreement and negotiation—not only about platform governance but also about participants' understandings of platforms and their roles in the political process.

TENSIONS BETWEEN ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL IMPERATIVES

Most platforms were not designed with political campaigns or governments in mind as their primary users. However, as more political participation takes place online, the tensions between the economic interests of platforms and the needs of users or state regulators are increasingly fraught.

Many platform companies' business models rely on advertising revenues from huge numbers of inexpensive ads purchased by millions of advertisers and are predicated on a low-regulatory environment. As of 2019, Facebook has 7 million advertisers; reviewing every ad with more than a cursory algorithmic check would hurt the company's bottom line.⁸ Because of this, understanding the implications of platform-based advertising for democratic processes is not prioritized—in fact, the implications may not even be considered.

While platforms do profit from political advertising campaigns and through this outreach create valuable networks with government officials, it is important to remember that this is not a primary revenue generator or even necessarily a significant one; platforms' involvement in democratic and electoral processes is

⁸ Kerry Flynn, "Cheatsheet: Facebook Now Has 7m Advertisers," *Digiday*, January 31, 2019, <https://digiday.com/marketing/facebook-earnings-q4-2018/>.

incidental. How campaigns use these commercial products creates significant tension between normative goals related to democratic participation and political speech and the realities of platforms' commercial business models, such as microtargeted advertisements and users as unfiltered content producers.

Tensions also exist between platform business models and government regulators. The origins of these tensions reflect the fact that regulations for political advertisements were devised prior to the Platform Era. But as political campaigns move online, so do regulators. For example, leading up to the 2016 US elections, political advertisements on Facebook and Google were not required to indicate who paid for them. But in the aftermath of the election, Facebook, Google, and Twitter came under fire in light of growing evidence of Russia's use of social media platforms in its disinformation campaign, and the Federal Election Commission established new disclosure requirements for digital political ads posted on Facebook with images or videos.⁹

In this context, Katherine Haenschen and Jordan Wolf investigated the origins of the lack of rules governing political advertisements on platforms prior to the 2016 election. Why weren't these disclosures required of political ads on social media from the start? Haenschen and Wolf documented platforms' efforts to contest regulation in this space and avoid a firm ruling on disclosure requirements. In short, Facebook and Google took advantage of an already flawed system for their own economic benefit. Among other rationales, the platforms argued that they could neither change the ads they were running nor enforce disclaimer requirements and continue to be profitable.

Leading up to the 2018 US midterm elections, Google, Facebook, and Twitter began to tighten guidelines and implement new tools for transparency and accountability around digital political advertising.¹⁰ But with growing concerns surrounding the effectiveness of these tools and spending on US political digital advertising projected to reach \$3.3 billion in 2020, the tensions between platforms' economic interests and stakeholders' political interests are more important than ever to explore.¹¹

Similarly, platform companies often have economic incentives not to regulate bad or problematic behavior. For instance, Fenwick McKelvey found that the prominent NationBuilder platform takes on not

⁹ Craig Timberg and Tony Romm, "New Report on Russian Disinformation, Prepared for the Senate, Shows the Operation's Scale and Sweep," *Washington Post*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/12/16/new-report-russian-disinformation-prepared-senate-shows-operations-scale-sweep/>; April Glaser, "Political Ads on Facebook Now Need to Say Who Paid for Them," *Future Tense* (blog), Slate, December 18, 2017, <https://slate.com/technology/2017/12/political-ads-on-facebook-now-need-to-say-who-paid-for-them.html>.

¹⁰ Tony Romm, "Who's Behind Those Political Ads on Facebook? Now, You Can Find Out," *Washington Post*, May 24, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/05/24/whos-behind-those-political-ads-on-facebook-now-you-can-find-out/>; Daisuke Wakabayashi, "Google Will Ask Buyers of U.S. Election Ads to Prove Identities," *New York Times*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/04/technology/google-election-ad-rules.html>.

¹¹ Emily Glazer and Patience Haggin, "Google's Tool to Tame Election Influence Has Flaws," *Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/google-archive-of-political-ads-is-fraught-with-missing-content-de-lays-11563355800>.

only international clients from both left- and right-wing political parties but also advertising companies, purveyors of fake news, and clients listed as hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

While it is a political engagement platform, NationBuilder's purpose is not purely political—it is also commercial. NationBuilder's problematic uses are not subject to formal regulation, though the platform can be subjected to social or financial pressures to impact its governance decisions. However, the threat to a company's profits if it is pushed to limit its morally questionable clientele is real. These tensions surrounding access—particularly for the most controversial users—fall at the heart of discussions surrounding how platforms are, or should be, governed.

[R]egulations for political advertisements were devised prior to the Platform Era. But as political campaigns move online, so do regulators.

TENSIONS AROUND THE USE OF PLATFORMS AND THEIR DATA

People use platforms in their daily lives to communicate, inform themselves, make purchases, and perform a variety of social tasks—in short, platforms have become both digital marketplace *and* digital public sphere, where users expect their fundamental rights, including free speech and privacy, to be protected.

And yet privately owned companies are not restricted by legal or constitutional provisions—such as the First Amendment in the US—intended to protect the rights of individuals from the state. These tensions have led scholars, including Amélie Pia Heldt, to ask: Can a platform that hosts millions (or, in some cases, billions) of users and offers increasingly essential services still be treated as a strictly private actor? This question does not simply concern policy decisions—it also appeals to broader tensions between democratic values and commercial ownership in platform governance: whether users' expectations of digital platforms as spaces where their fundamental political and economic rights are protected can or *should* reflect the legal reality.

Further, political actors often use platforms in ways that accord with practices predating platform technologies—even when these technologies were expected to disrupt those very practices. This gives rise to discrepancies between the normative possibilities platform technologies offer for democratic deliberation and the realities of their use by political actors.

For instance, constituents want to use platforms to communicate with their political representatives—and vice versa—because it's easier, but the quality of the communication is poor. Samantha McDonald found that digital platforms offer a face for engagement with policymakers while dissuading actual opportunities to improve democratic communication. US congressional staffers often devalue social media communications and demarcate it as a separate form of labor from traditional methods of correspondence, such as

email, mail, and phone. Although platform technologies may lead to increased citizen and policymaker interaction, McDonald argues there is little democratic value in platforms that do not offer deliberative two-way communication or policy influence.

And yet many platforms *have* been sold as deliberative democratic spaces. In Facebook's own words, "The size and diversity of the platform offers a town square-like atmosphere where people gather to voice opinions, interact with other voters and easily engage with the leaders who make the decisions that affect their lives every day."¹² Until recently, many academics and policymakers alike accepted this premise.

Platforms and their stakeholders—including researchers and practitioners—have various needs and goals that influence how we understand platforms, their functions, and their value. The research presented at this conference not only raised questions about this assumption but also suggested that we begin to think more critically about our own goals and biases, lest we ignore—or misinterpret—the reality on the ground.

Most essential to explore are tensions around the needs of practitioners and researchers to use data provided by platforms *despite* their knowledge of the flaws in these data. For instance, Jessica Baldwin-Philippi explored how political campaigns deal with the limitations and flaws of data provided to them by privately owned platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as well as niche data and data visualization platforms such as Optimizely, Catalyst, and NationBuilder.

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Baldwin-Philippi and others emphasized the messy reality of data-driven campaigning and spoke to the organizational power struggles that go on within campaigns, as well as the incentives platform companies have to make strong claims about the accuracy of their data. In this way, some campaign workers must use data they know is limited (e.g., Facebook prioritizes engagement over time while Twitter prioritizes metrics such as "top" tweets and followers) or even flawed (e.g., instances of Facebook miscalculating metrics presented to advertisers) in order to justify the decisions they make on the campaign.¹³ Negotiations about the value of platform-generated data play out both internally and in public as campaigns present themselves as "data-driven," users of "big data," and technologically competent.

¹² "Election Day 2014 on Facebook," Facebook Newsroom, November 4, 2014, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2014/11/election-day-2014-on-facebook/>.

¹³ Kelsey Sutton, (2018, October 17) "Facebook Hid Inflated Video Ad Metrics Error for Over a Year, Advertisers Allege," *Adweek*, October 17, 2018, <https://www.adweek.com/digital/facebook-hid-inflated-video-ad-metrics-error-for-over-a-year-advertisers-allege/>; KeyMedia, "How Facebook Organic Reach Has Changed," KeyMedia Solutions blog, February 20, 2018, <https://keymediasolutions.com/news/facebook/how-facebook-organic-reach-has-changed/>.

MOVING FORWARD

In the Platform Era, layers of governance relationships shape (and complicate) interactions between platform companies and their various stakeholders, including users, advertisers, governments, and political practitioners and actors. The various tensions underlying these relationships structure discussions and decisions about platform governance in important ways.

While platforms' business models are predicated on the existence of low-regulatory environments that allow mass user participation, they are increasingly political arenas and, therefore, targets of regulation. Moving forward, how can platform companies and their stakeholders—policymakers, state regulators, researchers, political practitioners, and users—navigate conflicting economic and political imperatives? And if governments are not equipped to make or enforce decisions to alleviate these tensions, who is or should be?

Critical Questions for the Study of Platforms

The “Rise of Platforms” conference closed with a discussion about the trajectory of the field of research on platform governance. We conclude this report by briefly exploring some of the most compelling and provocative questions raised by this conversation, setting the stage for future discourse within this burgeoning field.

Discussions at the conference underscored the need for researchers to think critically about what sites they study, what questions they ask, and what data they use. As scholars come to understand the nuances of platform data, they must ask: What data do researchers have, what data is missing, and why? Facebook’s political advertising archive included ads for Bush’s Baked Beans in its first release because its algorithm couldn’t tell the difference between the former president and the legume. Understanding exactly what platform companies include in datasets *and why* is paramount to conducting quality research.

Panelists also asked which types of transparency will be needed in the Platform Era. Platforms and governments have focused primarily on transparency in terms of *quantitative data* and *content*—for instance, around what content stays up or comes down. However, many of the questions researchers grappled with during the conference were not simply how many YouTube channels were demonetized, but rather, how did a platform decide what to include in their definition of unfriendly advertiser content? What did that decision-making process look like, and how might the information available to them, the structure of their organization, and their relationships have had unintended effects on that process? Panelists did not want more big data—they wanted transparency surrounding (and especially qualitative data on) platform processes that directly influence democratic norms and ideals.

Throughout the conference, there was a resounding call for more comparative and historical research on platforms, such the work of Heidi Tworek. Tworek traced how news agencies during World War I (such as Reuters, Havas, and Wolff) served as “bottlenecks” for the supply of information; in essence, these agencies were the Google or Facebook of their time, serving as multinational black boxes of information. While platform companies’ contemporary control over information may seem like a novel problem, historical research such as Tworek’s demonstrates not only that these problems existed before, but also that a free and successfully competitive information market may be the exception rather than the norm.

We must consider the history of these platforms, especially in the context of policymaking processes and decisions that continue to shape not only how we use but also how we understand platforms and how they function. Understanding the context within which past decisions about platform governance were made

can inform choices about which policies must be jettisoned and which are worth adapting for the needs and values of contemporary societies. For instance, what challenges do digital technologies present for democratic life, and how might they best be addressed in order to protect democracy in the digital age through shared policy solutions?

However, conference participants voiced concerns that such research could fall victim to a nostalgic view of the past—for instance, the assumption of a “golden age” of the internet and the burgeoning scene of social media is reminiscent of a rose-tinted narrative of twentieth-century journalism.¹⁴ New scholarship on platform governance will need to examine the normative assumptions held by the communication field about the meaning and value of democracy. What values do we embrace when we discuss publics and elites, deliberation and participation, or the institutions that organize these aspects of public life, and how do these values intersect with changes in platforms, economic models, and democratic practices?

Finally, the conference highlighted a growing need for researchers to reassess their own roles in this changing environment. Researchers are now equal parts observers and actors in the realm of technology and politics, and depend on the infrastructures platforms provide. What does this mean for the power platforms hold in the communication field and, more broadly, how does the field maintain ethical standards, independence, and legitimacy in the eyes of the public, while also maintaining essential relationships with these powerful companies?

Researchers are now equal parts observers and actors in the realm of technology and politics, and depend on the infrastructures platforms provide.

MOVING FORWARD

Platform companies are increasingly central to social, political, and economic life around the world. They have built large and diverse user bases around global digital platforms that enable a variety of communicative interactions. In the process, platforms have come to host vast amounts of public and commercial information, to organize attention and access to it, and to shape social life as we know it. As such, understanding the decisions that shape user experience and behavior on digital platforms, along with the layers of governance relationships that structure interactions between platforms and their stakeholders, is more important than ever. Platform governance, therefore, is central to a burgeoning field of interdisciplinary research on technology and society.

¹⁴ Heidi Tworek and John Maxwell Hamilton, “Why the ‘Golden Age’ of Newspapers Was the Exception, Not the Rule,” *NiemanLab*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2018/05/why-the-golden-age-of-newspapers-was-the-exception-not-the-rule/>.

As the scholarly community begins to acknowledge the rise of the Platform Era, the “Rise of Platforms” conference—and this report—highlight some of the key challenges and tensions that platform governance presents to researchers, policymakers, and users, as well as to the companies themselves. Above all, the challenges, tensions, and critical questions identified in this report reflect the complex nature of platform governance in a multistakeholder arena of socio-political-economic activity.

As research on platforms as an object of analysis moves forward, we hope that the themes outlined here can help guide the questions being asked. Investigating the challenges of platform governance by diverse actors, unpacking the tensions between stakeholders, using comparative and historical methods of inquiry, and pushing for greater transparency surrounding decision-making at these companies are all paramount to understanding how these new technologies impact democratic life.

Recommended Readings

Below, you will find a set of key readings related to platform governance and the increasing prominence of platforms in our social lives. These recommendations are not intended to be comprehensive; rather, they reflect a broad selection of scholarship relevant to the themes raised throughout the conference and during discussions.

Conceptualizing Platforms

- Bossetta, Michael. "The Digital Architectures of Social Media: Comparing Political Campaigning on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat in the 2016 US Election." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 95, no. 2 (June 2018): 471–96.
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- Castells, Manuel. "The New Public Sphere: Global Civil society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 78–93.
- Gillespie, Tarleton. "The Politics of 'Platforms.'" *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 347–64.
- Helmond, Anne. "The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready." *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080>.
- Plantin, Jean-Christophe, Carl Lagoze, Paul N. Edwards, and Christian Sandvig. "Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook." *New Media & Society* 20, no. 1 (2018): 293–310.
- Van Dijck, José, Thomas Poell, and Martijn De Waal. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Platforms and Politics

- Coleman, Stephen. *Can the Internet Strengthen Democracy?*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017.
- Dahlgren, Peter. "The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation." *Political Communication* 22, no. 2 (2005): 147–62.
- Dennis, James. *Beyond Slacktivism: Political Participation on Social Media*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Karpf, David. "The Partisan Technology Gap." In *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice*, edited by Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis, 199–216. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.
- Kies, Raphaël. *Promises and Limits of Web-Deliberation*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

- Kreiss, Daniel, and Shannon C. McGregor. "Technology Firms Shape Political Communication: The Work of Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, and Google with Campaigns during the 2016 US Presidential Cycle." *Political Communication* 35, no. 2 (2018): 155–77.

Platform Governance

- DeNardis, Laura, and Andrea M. Hackl. "Internet Governance by Social Media Platforms." *Telecommunications Policy* 39, no. 9 (2015): 761–70.
- Gillespie, Tarleton. "Regulation of and by Platforms." In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, edited by Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick, and Thomas Poell, 254–78. London: Sage Publishing, 2018.
- Gillespie, Tarleton. *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.
- Gorwa, Robert. "What Is Platform Governance?" *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 6 (2019): 854–71.
- Helberger, Natali, Jo Pierson, and Thomas Poell. "Governing Online Platforms: From Contested to Cooperative Responsibility." *The Information Society* 34, no. 1 (2018): 1–14.
- Horwitz, Robert B. *The Irony of Regulatory Reform: The Deregulation of American Telecommunications*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- McKelvey, Fenwick, and Jill Piebiak. "Porting the Political Campaign: The NationBuilder Platform and the Global Flows of Political Technology." *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (2018): 901–918.
- Schulz, Wolfgang. "Regulating Intermediaries to Protect Privacy Online—the Case of the German NetzDG." Preprint, posted August 13, 2018, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3216572>.
- Suzor, Nicholas. "Digital Constitutionalism: Using the Rule of Law to Evaluate the Legitimacy of Governance by Platforms." *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 3 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118787812>.

Platforms and the Media

- Kim, Young Mie, Jordan Hsu, David Neiman, Colin Kou, Levi Bankston, Soo Yun Kim, Richard Heinrich, Robyn Baragwanath, and Garvesh Raskutti. "The Stealth Media? Groups and Targets behind Divisive Issue Campaigns on Facebook." *Political Communication* 35, no. 4 (2018): 515–541.
- Helberger, Natali. "On the Democratic Role of News Recommenders." *Digital Journalism*, June 12, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1623700>.
- Nechushtai, Efrat. "Could Digital Platforms Capture the Media through Infrastructure?" *Journalism* 19, no. 8 (2018): 1043–1058.
- Nielsen, Rasmus Kleis, and Sarah Anne Ganter. "Dealing with Digital Intermediaries: A Case Study of the Relations between Publishers and Platforms." *New Media & Society* 20, no. 4 (2018): 1600–1617.

Commercial Incentives and Advertising

- Barocas, Solon. (2012, November). The Price of Precision: Voter Microtargeting and Its Potential Harms to the Democratic Process. In *PLEAD '12 Proceedings of the First Edition Workshop on Politics, Elections and Data*, 31–36. New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery, November 2012.
- Bell, Emily J., and Tyler Owen. *The Platform Press: How Silicon Valley Reengineered Journalism*. New York, NY: Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia Journalism School, 2017.
- Bodó, Balázs, Natali Helberger, and Claus H. de Vreese. "Political Micro-targeting: A Manchurian Candidate or Just a Dark Horse?" *Internet Policy Review* 6, no. 4 (2017).
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- Franz, Michael M., Erika Franklin Fowler, and Travis N. Ridout. "Loose Cannons or Loyal Foot Soldiers? Toward a More Complex Theory of Interest Group Advertising Strategies." *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 3 (2016): 738–51.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York, NY: Perseus Books, 2019.

Transparency and Disinformation

- Ananny, Mike, and Kate Crawford. "Seeing without Knowing: Limitations of the Transparency Ideal and Its Application to Algorithmic Accountability." *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (2018): 973–89.
- Benkler, Yochai, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
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