

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
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Big data, big tech, big problems: Time to look beyond

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Introduction

We hardly talk about the internet anymore. Instead, we talk about platforms: tweeting, googling, and so on, with almost all our social interactions mediated by technologies. Not only do we no longer talk about the internet, but we have also adopted the intentionally empty concepts with which dominant companies seek to naturalise their extractive interactions: “sharing economy”, “communities”, “likes”, and a long etcetera that even includes the idea of “platforms”. On this, Ben Tarnoff indicates that the positioning of the word “platform” has been strategic for big tech, as it projects an aura of openness and neutrality, hiding its control over our digital life and its active role in managing those spaces.²

But beyond the convenience it has for big tech, what does the concept of platformisation refer to? First of all, it is a type of business model, increasingly predominant, in which a technological infrastructure is designed as an essential mechanism for extracting and using data. And it is the latter that is essential, driving these companies and giving them their edge over competitors. In other words, datafication underpins platformisation. As data becomes a central resource for technology and non-technology sectors of the economy, companies in various sectors must quickly develop ways to obtain and aggregate this information.³

But not all companies using this logic are equally powerful. For example, in recent years, dominant companies from the global North, particularly from Silicon Valley (the companies we mostly refer to when we say “big tech”), have cultivated an advantageous position as a result of their unusual appetite for data, which they must obtain in various forms and using multiple methods (including the purchase of promising start-ups).

For this reason, these “platforms” have the characteristics of both companies and marketplaces. That is to say, on the one hand, they offer various products and services, and on the other, they are constituted as markets for economic exchange. As intermediaries, specifically, platforms connect and define relationships between entities in the multilateral markets they host, while their pursuit of network effects (i.e. the more users use a platform, the more valuable that platform becomes) ends in a “virtuous circle” that leads to winner-take-all monopolies.⁴

In this sense, for many, platformisation signals a broader shift in capitalism: one where the entire economy shifts from a market-based economy to one based on the advantageous conditions that platforms can impose in digital markets. Moreover, the platforms’ management of user interactions and relationships in these markets is automated by data-driven algorithms designed for economic gain, and which are structured through technical interfaces and private terms of service, implying a highly politically and culturally advantageous position.

In addition, this unusual appetite for data has led these companies to seek out unregulated and under-regulated areas for extracting personal data. As a result, many researchers claim that we are facing a kind of digital colonialism, in which these companies build communication infrastructures, such as social media platforms and network connectivity, with the express purpose of harvesting

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2 Tarnoff, B. (2022, 16 June). ‘Wallets and eyeballs’: how eBay turned the internet into a marketplace. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/jun/16/wallets-and-eyeballs-how-ebay-turned-the-internet-into-a-marketplace>

3 Srnicek, N. (2017). The challenges of platform capitalism: Understanding the logic of a new business model. *Juncture*, 23(4), 254-257. <https://doi.org/10.1111/newe.12023>

4 Srnicek, N. (2017). *Ibid.*

data, making profits, and storing the data as raw material for predictive analytics. As Danielle Coleman⁵ concludes, this allows them to accrue profits from revenue derived from rent (in the form of intellectual property or access to infrastructure) and surveillance (in the form of “Big Data”). It also allows them to control the flow of information, social activities, and various other political, social, economic and even military functions mediated by their technologies.

The eruption of the pandemic

The pandemic has deepened the warnings that were already being made by academia and civil society. For Gavrilenko and Markeeva,⁶ the forced digitisation of the past two years has revealed at least three key issues that should make us reflect deeply: the economic and ideological power of platforms, their capability of changing markets and influencing political institutions, and their increasing control over people’s lives.

For these researchers, thanks to the pandemic, it is now much clearer that the primary vector of competition in platformisation is not so much control of resources as control of access to them. In other words, big tech is not merely a “service provider”: far from neutrality, in many cases, the platforms are significant players in their own markets. The authors also point out how, due to the pandemic, political institutions have been influenced by the platforms’ ideology (which has also been referred to as the “Californian” or “Silicon Valley” ideology), and which has been adopted without question by economic elites in many countries. This ideology is nothing more than a form of libertarian thinking that, behind the common façade of “efficient technical solutions”, seeks to reduce costs and subordinate social policy to the requirements of labour flexibility and competitiveness, among others.

This relates to a development that is, in my opinion, more disturbing than the privatisation of digital spaces: that the state and platforms are forming a new consensus in the division of power and control over everyday life, testing all the various ways of expanding the aggregation of personal information to do this. In the context of developing solutions to prevent a pandemic, these actions are

necessary and justified, say Gavrilenko and Markeeva, but they warn that it is essential to create conditions for the post-pandemic world to consider the opinions and interests of citizens, traditional businesses, and public organisations.

Is it too complex or too late?

In this context, perhaps it is time to take a critical look at the prevention and mitigation mechanisms that have so far been promoted as public policy as a counterweight to the platforms. One should look, for example, at the role that more liberal interpretations of human rights have played in strengthening the power of these platforms. Rights such as freedom of expression have been co-opted by these companies for the almost non-existent intervention in their algorithms and terms of service as if they were neutral spaces where their profit interests were the equitable measure for all societies. Privacy and personal data protection, for their part, falter in the face of covert surveillance for commercial and political purposes that would seem to be an acceptable trade-off in societies exhausted under capitalist production. And even when the personal data legal frameworks of powerful local or regional contexts seem to work – as in the case of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union, which served as a shield of protection from WhatsApp’s change in terms of service in 2021 – this has only shifted personal data extractivism to confines with less protection and, above all, less power to stand up against big tech.⁷

Several authors have asked whether antitrust law can go deep enough to address the challenges posed by platformisation. For example, for Pawel Popiel,⁸ economic regulation and the separation of business lines are key ways of doing this. However, to address the real challenges of digitisation and platformisation, these policies cannot act in silos; and they must be accompanied by the promotion of alternatives to dominant platforms through subsidies, as this type of stimulus, which includes models of public ownership and governance, is essential to attaining benefits of scale. For Michael Kwet,⁹ antitrust reform, which is presented as a solution by countries in the global North with the

5 Coleman, D. (2019). Digital Colonialism: The 21st Century Scramble for Africa through the Extraction and Control of User Data and the Limitations of Data Protection Laws. *Michigan Journal of Race and Law*, 24(2). <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mjrl/vol24/iss2/6>

6 Gavrilenko, O., & Markeeva, A. (2020). Digital Colonization: Development of Digital Platforms in the Context of a Pandemic. *Postmodern Openings*, 11(1Sup2), 65-73. <https://doi.org/10.18662/po/11.1sup2/141>

7 Kilic, B., & Crabbe-Field, S. (2021, 14 May). You should be worried about how much info WhatsApp shares with Facebook. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/14/you-should-be-worried-about-how-much-info-whatsapp-shares-with-facebook>

8 Popiel, P. (2022). Regulating datafication and platformization: Policy silos and tradeoffs in international platform inquiries. *Policy & Internet*, 14(1), 28-46. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.283>

9 Kwet, M. (2022, 31 May). Digital Ecosocialism: Breaking the power of Big Tech. *TNI*. <https://longreads.tni.org/digital-ecosocialism>

desire to take care of their own colonial domains, is particularly problematic because it assumes that the problem of the digital economy is simply the size and “unfair practices” of large companies and not digital capitalism itself. The author reminds us that antitrust laws only work for those players who can compete, so there is little that legislative reform can do for the global South to stem the ongoing dominance of big tech platforms.

Along these lines, it has also been explored how data portability and interoperability measures can foster competition both within and across digital platforms, as they can address barriers to market entry arising from network effects and foster innovation. However, as an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report acknowledges,¹⁰ these measures are not suited to all circumstances. For example, where a dominant digital platform faces no rivals (including potential entrants with sufficient capacity to compete), these measures may be more appropriate in promoting competition in related and complementary markets than allowing competitors to the leading platform to emerge.

Many of these approaches lack a real geopolitical approach. It is not about the dominance of only a handful of ultra-powerful companies but also that they count on the protection of their governments that, in alliance, seek the economic supremacy of their countries. As Renata Avila¹¹ points out, such countries and companies have three elements that most developing nations and even middle-income countries lack: advanced capital and intellectual resources, a domestic and international legal architecture in their favour, and the current patent and intellectual property system that artificially restricts knowledge sharing and innovation.

In this context, for many authors, the response to platformisation should not only rely on individual or coordinated legal reactions but also on the impulse that governments should give to digital sovereignty, consisting of locally designing and producing the next generation of technologies that have values, behaviours and social dynamics different from those that dominate big tech. However, this discussion is similar to those occurring in Latin America regarding the exploitation of natural resources by foreign mining mega-companies: for

many, a way out of this exploitation is nationalisation, which is a pale answer to ending extractivism because it now will be exercised by the state. In fact, many of the state funds for new technologies seek to find the new “local unicorn” that will finally make real the promise of building the local Silicon Valley.

Peak data

Perhaps, as in mining, the strategy should vary and, instead, work on building critical reflection on data extractivism that will put an end to the idea that personal data can be produced and exploited at almost no cost. While it is possible to increase these costs through legislation, big tech is today in such an advantageous position with the amount of information it handles that it can dictate the price: one need only recall Google’s promise to end third-party cookies by 2023.¹² In this problematic context, perhaps it is time to look at Geert Lovink’s proposal,¹³ which states that it is only a matter of time before this super-maximisation of data flows reaches its peak, whether due to technical issues or not. Following the definition of peak oil, Lovink believes that peak data will be the moment when the maximum rate of extractivism is reached, and thus, the platform logic implodes:

Peak data is related to the distinct concept of data depletion when the moral cost of “surveillance capitalism” outweighs the economic benefit for the few and society as a whole starts to decline because of an excess of social disparity. Once the peak is reached, the presumption that the better the information, the better the decision-making process can no longer be maintained.

The idea of peak data also seems interesting not in the sense of believing that data is a finite natural resource like oil (on the contrary, it is infinite and intentionally produced by humans), but in the more recent context of understanding the idea of “peak oil”: it is not caused by resource depletion (along the lines of the highly debatable Malthusian idea of overpopulation) but produced by the drop in demand for oil due to the imperative to end the use of fossil fuels because of the planetary climate and ecological crisis.

10 OECD Competition Committee. (2021). *Data Portability, Interoperability and Digital Platform Competition*. OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/daf/competition/data-portability-interoperability-and-digital-platform-competition-2021.pdf>

11 Ávila, R. (2018). ¿Soberanía digital o colonialismo digital? *Sur*, 27. <https://sur.conectas.org/es/soberania-digital-o-colonialismo-digital>

12 Rus, D. (2022, 30 June). Google Analytics 4: Moving Into A New Era Of Data Tracking. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2022/06/30/google-analytics-4-moving-into-a-new-era-of-data-tracking/?sh=7158dacb18a3>

13 Lovink, G. (2022, 7 April). Proposition on Peak Data. *Institute of Network Cultures*. <https://networkcultures.org/geert/2022/04/07/proposition-on-peak-data>

In a concrete sense, perhaps it is precisely this crisis – the most crucial challenge in the history of humankind – that will help to reach peak data in the sense that, as the 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) mitigation report says,¹⁴ the only way we can be sure that digitalisation will not contribute to increasing energy use in various industries is if it is decoupled from increased consumption. If, so far, platformisation has been primarily driven by datafication for consumer profiling, the data peak is already near, and governments and different

stakeholders must urgently design and deploy a different kind of digitalisation if we want to stay within the 1.5°C targets. In this framework, it is not so far-fetched for the digital rights community to look closely at how the climate and ecological crisis can be vital to understanding the new possibilities for ending the dominance of big data and big tech. The bad news, of course, is that the latter is already deploying investments to show themselves as the “green way” out of the crisis.¹⁵ If the fossil fuel kings fall, others are running after that throne. Let’s not let them.

14 Peña, P. (2022, 10 April). That technological future does not exist. *Latin American Institute of Terraforming*. <https://terraforminglatam.net/that-technological-future-does-not-exist>

15 Brigham, K. (2022, 28 June). Why Big Tech is pouring money into carbon removal. *CNBC*. <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/06/28/why-companies-like-stripe-meta-and-alphabet-are-behind-carbon-removal.html>

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

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2021-2022 Report
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