# Governing digital societies: Private platforms, public values

## José van Dijck

*Distinguished University professor in media and digital societies, Utrecht University, the Netherlands*

ABSTRACT

Online digital platforms have deeply penetrated every sector in society, disrupting markets, labor relations and institutions, while transforming social and civic practices. Moreover, platform dynamics have affected the very core of democratic processes and political communication. After a decade of platform euphoria, in which tech companies were celebrated for empowering ordinary users, problems have been mounting over the past three years. Disinformation, fake news, and hate speech spread via YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook poisoned public discourse and influenced elections. The Facebook—Cambridge Analytica scandal epitomized the many privacy breaches and security leaks dogging social media networks. Further compounded by charges of tax evasion and the undermining of fair labor laws, big tech companies are facing a serious 'techlash'. As some argued, the promotion of longstanding public values such as tolerance, democracy, and transparency are increasingly compromised by the global 'exports' of American tech companies which dominate the online infrastructure for the distribution of online cultural goods: news, video, social talk, and private communication (Geltzer & Gosh, 2018). As extensively discussed in our book 'The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connected World', the digitization and 'platformization' of societies involve several intense struggles between competing ideological systems and their contesting actors, prompting important questions: Who should be responsible for anchoring public values in platform societies that are driven by algorithms and fueled by data? What kind of public values should be negotiated? And how can European citizens and governments guard certain social and cultural values while being dependent on a platform ecosystem which architecture is based on commercial values and is rooted in a neolibertarian world view?

© 2019 José van Dijck. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Online digital platforms have deeply penetrated every sector in society, disrupting markets, labor relations and institutions, while transforming social and civic practices. Moreover, platform dynamics have affected the very core of democratic processes and political communication. After a decade of platform euphoria, in which tech companies were celebrated for empowering ordinary users, problems have been mounting over the past three years. Disinformation, fake news, and hate speech spread via YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook poisoned public discourse and influenced elections. The Facebook—Cambridge Analytica scandal epitomized the many privacy breaches and security leaks dogging social media networks. Further compounded by charges of tax evasion and the undermining of fair labor laws, big tech companies are facing a serious 'techlash'. As some argued, the promotion of longstanding public values such as tolerance, democracy, and

transparency are increasingly compromised by the global 'exports' of American tech companies which dominate the online infrastructure for the distribution of online cultural goods: news, video, social talk, and private communication (Geltzer and Gosh, 2018).

As extensively discussed in our book 'The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connected World', the digitization and 'platformization' of societies involve several intense struggles between competing ideological systems and their contesting actors, prompting important questions: Who should be responsible for anchoring public values in platform societies that are driven by algorithms and fueled by data? What kind of public values should be negotiated? And how can European citizens and governments guard certain social and cultural values while being dependent on a platform ecosystem which architecture is based on commercial values and is rooted in a neo-libertarian world view?

## 2.    The platformization of European digital space

Europe has become increasingly dependent on the American platform ecosystem dominated by the Big Five tech companies (Google-Alphabet, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft), which techno-commercial architecture is rooted in neoliberal market values. But beyond market value, the platform ecosystem revolves around societal power and influence. The Big Five increasingly act as gatekeepers to all online social traffic and economic activities; their services influence the very texture of society and the process of democracy. In other words, they have gained rule-setting power. There have been many clashes between American tech companies and European regulators as well as national legislators over public values, including privacy (resulting in the GDPR), fair competition (resulting in the EU levying substantial fines on Google-Alphabet), tax evasion (resulting in Facebook changing its tax base policy), and the condemnation of fake news and hate speech (resulting in the German parliament imposing a 24-hour deadline on social networks to take down such expressions).

We often hear from Silicon Valley CEOs that Europe is 'cracking down' on American Big Tech out of 'jealousy' (Solon, 2018). I take a different stance on this issue: the American platform ecosystem hardly allows for public space on the internet and tends to favor commercial benefits and private interests over public ones. Therefore, Europe should articulate its own governance strategy based on its appraisal of a strong public sector, independent institutions, fair taxation, and the common good. Protecting the Rhineland model of a social market economy should not be considered an economic liability but rather an asset: a loss of public trust is ultimately a loss of business value.[1] As Mariana Mazzucato (2018) argues, it is important to assess what constitutes *societal* value in addition to

market value, because both types of values are integrally part of a nation's economic strength.

Platformization has disrupted not just markets and sectors, but has started to uproot the infrastructural, organizational design of societies (Helmond, 2015; Plantin et al. 2016). It is crucial to study *how* platform ecosystems operate, because we know very little about big platforms' technical operations, their governance and business models—partly as a result of those being trade secrets (Van Dijck, 2013). As we explain in our recent book, the Big Five operate about seventy strategic *infrastructural platforms*: social networks, web hosting, pay systems, login and identification-services, cloud services, advertising agencies, search engines, audiovisual platforms, map and navigating services, app stores, analytics services, and so on (see also Van Dijck, Poell and De Waal, 2018, chapter 1). Together, these infrastructural platforms form the backbone of an ecosystem that is boundary-and-border-agnostic. Besides owning and operating a core of infrastructural platforms, the Big Five are also branching out in a variety of *sectors* that are progressively interwoven with this online infrastructure. Indeed, platformization affects *all* sectors in society, both private (e.g. transport, finance, retail) and public (e.g. education, health), hence also affecting the common good. Power is exercised *between* infrastructural and sectoral platforms, as well as *across sectors*. Tech companies leverage control over data flows and algorithmic governance not just through operating a few major infrastructural platforms (e.g. Alphabet-Google in Search and Cloud services) but by extending these powers across many sectors (e.g. Google Apps for Education, Google Health, Google Shopping, etc.). Unprecedented network effects across the global online ecosystem are thus gained through the potential of horizontal, vertical, and 'diagonal' integration of data flows, creating user lock-ins and path-dependency.

The platform mechanisms underpinning the ecosystem are largely opaque and out of sight for users and governments. Platformization is overwhelmingly driven by commercial interests which often take precedence over societal values. Some of the main problems are an almost total lack of transparency into how data flows are steered within and between sectors, how algorithms influence user behavior, how selection mechanisms impact the visibility of content, and how business models favor economic transactions over the public interest. In addition, public sectors that historically serve and protect the common good, such as education and health, are rapidly encapsulated in the American platform ecosystem, where they risk to be turned into privatized commodities. Platform companies inadvertently take over vital functions from state and public bodies once they become major gatekeepers in the circulation of health and educational data flows as well as in news and information cycles. Platforms thus increasingly become the new infrastructural providers. As Mark Zuckerberg observed in 2017, Facebook wants to be a 'social infrastructure'—a term that resonates with the notion of public utilities. Global social infrastructures, as we know, come with awesome responsibilities not just for the welfare of the company and its shareholders, but for the wellbeing of the people as societal stakeholders.

---

[1] According to Peters and Weggeman (2010), the Rhineland model presumes an active government that is involved in major social issues, such as minimizing poverty and environmental protection, advocating a strong public sector and government regulation and enforcement.

## 3.    Who is responsible for public values and the common good?

If European societies want to guard public values and the common good in an online world, they first need to articulate *what kind of public values* they want to foreground when designing an ideal digital society. Norms and values are often left implicit. Looking at regulator's disputes with tech companies over the past few years, it seems clear that values such as privacy, security, accuracy, and transparency are at stake. Europeans insist on protecting their private information, securing their internet access, relying on accurate information, and pursuing transparency in terms of service. But beyond these principles relating directly to the internet as a digital environment, there is also a need to articulate values that pertain to much broader societal issues, such as democratic control of the public sphere, a level playing field for all actors, anti-discrimination practices, fairness in taxation and labor, and clarity with regards to (shared) responsibility and accountability. Public values are not a simple set of rules that you can buy 'off the shelf' and implement in society; on the contrary, they are disputed and negotiated at every level of governance – from schools and hospitals to local city councils, and from national governments to supra-national legislators.

The negotiation of public values is historically anchored in institutions or sectors, where—after extensive deliberation—they are moored in laws, agreements, or professional codes. For instance, in news journalism, public values such as accuracy and fairness in reporting are (self-) regulated via professional codes; in education, the norms for privacy, fairness and accessibility are controlled partly by the government and partly by a school's agreements with parents; urban transport is regulated by city councils and local governments. Over the past decade, platform companies have preferred to bypass institutional processes through which societies are organized – sectoral regulation, public accountability, and responsibility – by claiming their exceptional status.[2] Facebook, Google, Uber and other big platforms have argued they are mere 'facilitators', connecting users to creators or producers, and connecting content to users; insisting on their status as 'connectors' and avoiding regular legal categories, platforms and their operators have avoided taking responsibility. Until 2017, Facebook firmly denied its functioning as a 'media company' although more than half the news consumed by Americans comes to them through Newsfeed. And Uber's refusal to accept its status as a 'transportation company' was fought all the way up to the European court, where it was finally confirmed in December 2017.

So who is responsible for guarding public values in a digital society? The European Rhineland model ideally balances off the powers of state, market, and civil society actors in multi-stakeholder organizations. Obviously, these multiple stakeholders do not have the same interests, so government bodies need to take the roles entrusted to them as legislator, regulator, moderator, and enforcer to negotiate the public interest. However, because the architecture of the American ecosystem is uniquely engineered by market actors—and its infrastructure is dominated mostly by the Big Five—it is difficult for state and civil society actors in Europe to put their stamp on these negotiations. Governing the platform society has turned out to be a big struggle over public values and the common good.

Most visible to the public eye are the outcomes of a wide range of negotiation battles; the concerns underlying these negotiations involve a variety of public values, but it is not always immediately evident what the common denominators are. We read about EU-regulators levying big fines upon American tech firms, and understand this is about the principle of 'fair access' and a 'level playing field' of markets. We witness national governments like Germany impose strict rules on social networks to ban hate speech and fake news; of course, such judgment involves a fine balancing act between the right to free speech vis-à-vis the public values of accuracy, fairness, and nondiscrimination. Cities like Amsterdam and Barcelona have set limits to short-term online rentals, curbing the free reign of Airbnb while protecting a fair housing market and livable cities. Municipalities, schools, and hospitals negotiate contracts with big tech giants such as Google to exchange data for platform services while bartering their citizens', students', and patients' right to privacy and accessibility. Each negotiation between private platform companies, government agencies, independent institutions, and citizens discloses how interests sometimes clash, sometimes converge when negotiating public values. Many of these tradeoffs boil down to a set of fundamental questions such as: who owns and exploits data flows, who controls algorithmic governance, and who is *responsible* and *accountable* for their impact?

## 4.    Conclusion

The ideal platform society does not exist, and it will be hard to recalibrate the Western-European Rhineland model to make it fit with the American ecosystem's infrastructural architecture that privileges commercial values over public ones. Indeed, its architecture is currently firmly cemented in an American-based neoliberal set of principles that defines its operational dynamics. If European countries and the EU as a supra-national force want to secure their ideological bearings, they need to understand the ecosystem's underpinning mechanisms before they can start fortifying their legal and rinstitutional structures built on it. The implications of platformization on societies are profound, as platform ecosystems are shaping not only norms and values, but the very fabric of society.

Governing digital societies in Europe takes a serious effort at all levels, from local municipalities to national governments, from schools to collaborating universities, and from city governments to the European Parliament. European countries need to realize the limitations and possibilities of these competing networked infrastructures and articulate their position in the wake of emerging online superpowers (such as China, India, and of course the US) which ideologies and value systems are substantially different. Public values and

---

[2] This exceptional status has a legal basis in Section 230 of the American Communication Decency Act of 1996, which provides immunity from liability for providers and users of an "interactive computer service" who publish information provided by third-party users.

the common good are the very stakes in the struggle over platformization around the globe. Viewed through a European looking glass, governments at all levels, independent public institutions, and nonprofits can and should be proactive in negotiating those values on behalf of citizens and consumers. Implementing public values in the technological and socio-economic design of digital societies is an urgent European challenge which cannot be left to companies alone. If we want the internet to remain a democratic and open space, it requires a multi-stakeholder effort from (supra-)national and local governments, companies, civil society organizations, and citizens; legislation is and should be the result of value-negotiations between all actors who are jointly responsible for governing our digital societies.

## REFERENCES

Geltzer J, Ghosh D. Tech companies are ruining America's image. Foreign Policy 2018. 14 May https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/14/tech-companies-are-ruining-americas-image/.

Helmond A. The platformization of the web: making web data platform ready. Soc Media Society 2015;1(2) http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2056305115603080.

Mazzucato M. The value of everything. Making and taking in the global economy. New York: Allen Lane; 2018.

Peters J, Weggeman M. The Rhineland model. Reintroducing a European style of organization. Amsterdam: Business Contacts; 2010.

Plantin JC, Lagoze C, Edwards PN, Sandvig C. Infrastructure studies meet platform studies in the age of google and facebook. New Media Society 2016:1–18. Available at http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1461444816661553.

Solon O. Peter thiel: 'Europe is cracking down on silicon valley out of "jealousy". The Guardian 2018. 10 March https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/mar/15/peter-thiel-silicon-valley-europe-regulation.

Van Dijck. The culture of conectivity. A critical history of social media. New York: Oxford University Press; 2013.

Van Dijck J, Poell T, De Waal M. The platform society. Public values in a connective world. New York: Oxford University Press; 2018.