

# Review essay: When we talk about platforms and culture, what are we talking about?

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## Abstract

In this essay, two recently published books, *Platforms and Cultural Production*, by Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy, and *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*, by Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, are reviewed. By placing these two books in dialog with each other, I aim to explore two ways to understand and analyze culture in the context of platform society. Firstly, culture can be understood as cultural commodities that are produced and consumed in a platform environment. Secondly, various social groups make use of platforms in distinct ways, and cultures emerge from these creative practices.

## Keywords

content moderation, creative labor, cultural industry, Instagram, platformization, visual culture

In recent years, scholarship has increasingly positioned digital platforms at the center of its inquiry. In some work, for instance, Srnicek's (2016) ground-breaking work *Platform Capitalism*, platforms are examined for their capacity to monopolize, process, and use a large amount of data to formulate new economic relationships. Authors of other studies take a stand on seeing platforms as an integral part of society and examine their impact on the operation of public services such as healthcare and transportation (see van Dijck et al., 2018). Taken together, these studies address the crucial role platforms play in configuring every aspect of social life.

Within this context, an important question has been raised: How are platforms changing our culture? In this essay, I review two recently published books, *Platforms and*

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*Cultural Production*, by Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy, and *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*, by Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, which provide insights into the question. The first book builds an overarching narrative that links various empirical studies on platforms, to theorize how platforms affect cultural practices across industry segments (particularly the gaming, news, and social media entertainment industries). The second book focuses on Instagram and offers a detailed account of the platform's evolution and its relation to a border visual culture that permeates the social media landscape.

In *Platforms and Cultural Production*, Thomas Poell and his co-authors investigate how digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Douyin, or TikTok, affect today's cultural industries in profound and complex ways. The idea of this book originates from an article written by Nieborg and Poell (2018), entitled 'The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity', which was published in the journal *New Media & Society*. In that article, Nieborg and Poell (2018: 4276) theorize that the platformization of cultural production is 'the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystem, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries'. In this book, the three authors address the interplay between platforms and cultural producers throughout key phrases of cultural production (namely, cultural creation, distribution, marketing, and monetization) and recast their theory from an institutional perspective of platformization. They argue that 'platformization involves not only what we call institutional shifts in markets, infrastructures, and governance, but also changes in the practices of labor, creativity, and democracy' (Poell et al., 2022: 7) and provide a thorough explanation of each of these facets in sequence from Chapter 2 to Chapter 7.

In the first part of this book, 'Institutional Changes', the authors point out that platforms exercise significant infrastructural and institutional control over platform complementors under their governance framework. Chapter 2 ('Market') details the historically-informed process of concentration and digitalization in cultural industries and presents the role of platforms as 'aggregators of institutional connections, including economic transactions, that mediate between end-users and content and service providers' (Poell et al., 2022: 35). In addition to defining a platform as a multi-sided market, the authors intentionally position their argument in the field of cultural production, excluding 'lean platforms' (Srnicsek, 2016: 73) such as Uber and Airbnb from their discussion. They argue that, as platformization takes place, cultural producers, cultural intermediaries, and advertisers become increasingly dependent on platform for reaching end-users, and therefore have to develop content strategies that align with platform's business models. In this way, cultural producers and intermediaries are all turned into platform complementors, as 'these actors 'complement' the products and services provided by the platform' (Poell et al., 2022: 11). Following this chapter, the authors explore how platform databases, systems, and networks, and associated informational resources play a fundamental role in enabling content creation, distribution, marketing, and/or monetization (Chapter 3, 'Infrastructure'). Besides seeing platformization as an economic and infrastructural condition for cultural production, the authors also discuss platforms as instrumental to governance (Chapter 4, 'Governance'). They argue that, on the one hand, platform companies are subject to various national laws and regulations that determine

what cultural content can be exchanged on platforms. On the other hand, platforms actively adopt three interconnected strategies – regulation, curation, and moderation – to exert control over the practices of complementors. As a result, platform-dependent cultural producers change their practices accordingly, either adapting or negotiating with platforms’ inconsistent rules and regulations.

The tensions between platforms and cultural producers bring readers to the second part of this book (‘Shifting Cultural Practices’), in which the authors address the experiences of cultural producers in the context of platform-dependent work. Cultural producers have been facing issues such as precarity, individualization, and social and political inequalities historically, but when they are working within a platform environment, some of these issues are amplified (Chapter 5, ‘Labor’). Although platforms provide individuals with enhanced opportunities to participate in cultural production and express their creativity, the authors argue that creative expressions are constrained in the platform environment. Chapter 6 (‘Creativity’) discusses how the logic of niche customization and metrification, intertwined with platforms’ data systems, affect creative practices, and how the economic affordances of a platform complicate the relationship between branded content and authentic expression. Chapter 7 (‘Democracy’) describes the experiences of cultural producers when participating in public and civic life on platforms. In the concluding chapter, the authors close their investigation with a discussion of power. They reveal the institutional power that platforms hold over cultural producers, as well as the productive power that comes from the interaction between platforms, cultural producers, and other actors, which mobilizes existing systemic inequalities in the realm of cultural production.

By contrast, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* sets its focal point on one specific platform – Instagram. Throughout this book, Leaver et al. (2020) comprehensively examine the platform’s politics, esthetics, economy, and diverse user groups, highlighting Instagram as ‘an icon and avatar for understanding and mapping visual social media cultures’ (p. 12). Chapter 1 (‘Platform’) presents a historical overview of the development and evolution of Instagram. It started as a location check-in app called Burbn and became what Poell et al. (2022) would call a ‘platform subsidiary’ (p. 180) owned by Facebook. In this chapter, the authors emphasize that ‘Instagram is more than one thing’ (Leaver et al., 2020: 16) by detailing the continuous evolution of the platform’s functionalities, the changes to its business models, application program interface (API), algorithms, and community guidelines. This chapter illustrates in a detailed way the previously discussed book’s understanding of platforms as technological and economic infrastructure for cultural production.

Chapter 4 (‘Economies’) also shows similarities with some arguments made in *Platforms and Cultural Production*. This chapter examines how influencers were using vernacular practices to commercialize their content, even before Instagram introduced its Paid Partnership Program. It shows that influencers have been continuously adjusting their strategies in response to changes in Instagram’s affordances, algorithms, and content moderation rules, in order to maximize the visibility of their accounts and sponsored content. In this sense, Instagram influencers depend on the platform for creating, distributing, marketing, and monetizing their content, turning themselves into platform complementors, as addressed in the previously discussed book. Furthermore, what stands out

in this chapter is its contextual understanding of the commercial practices on Instagram as a form of ‘calibrated amateurism’ (Leaver et al., 2020: 87) that balances the professionalization of commercialism with performative authenticity (see also Abidin, 2017). These observations emphasize the tension between commerce and authenticity – which is also noted in Chapter 6 of *Platforms and Cultural Production*, where Poell et al. (2022) argue, ‘in platform-dependent cultural production, the increased demand for authenticity has coincided with the ever more forceful push of commercial/promotional constraints’ (p. 153).

Indeed, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* offers a prime view on the interaction between Instagram’s affordances and the economic activities of influencers. However, the focal point of this book is the visual esthetics of Instagram. As discussed in Chapter 2 (‘Aesthetics’), various forms of visual content (ranging from retro-style photographs to videos and gifs) that are posted to Instagram ‘form both the visual culture of the platform, and are part of the broader visual cultures in which users are situated’ (Leaver et al., 2020: 39). The book situates the visual content on Instagram, particularly selfies, prominently within the ecologies of mobile, social, visual, and locative platforms (Chapter 3, ‘Ecologies’). This chapter brings in the perspective of how camera-phones and smartphones enable individuals to record everyday moments photographically and to share these momentary experiences to Instagram. For instance, Instagram Stories, hashtags about certain locations, and the design of Instagram’s timeline are all functionalities that encourage users to transfer their experiences in a physical environment to Instagram in real-time and to keep themselves updated with other people’s life in real-time. As a result, Instagram’s esthetics have flowed into the material world, as museums, restaurants, homes, and tourist locations are being re-designed to provide visual stimulation (Chapter 5, ‘Culture’). This book also explores the activities of diverse communities and social groups on Instagram (see Chapter 5, ‘Culture’, and Chapter 6, ‘Lifespan’). It shows that as Instagram has become a meaningful space for various groups of users, it is worth exploring its social impact beyond its influence as merely a social media platform. Hence, the three authors name their final chapter ‘From the Instagram of Everything to the Everything of Instagram’, pulling all the threads together to present the continuous real-life impact of Instagram esthetics and their templatability.

Placing these two books in dialog with each other reveals two ways to understand and analyze culture in the context of platform society (van Dijck et al., 2018). Firstly, *Platforms and Cultural Production* examines culture in the sense of cultural commodities. Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/2002) argue that the standardization and mass production of cultural commodities are evidence of how culture industry works as an instrument for ideological control over consumers under monopoly capitalism. In his later work, *Culture Industry Reconsidered*, Adorno (1975) writes in a more explicit tone on what he meant by industry, saying it ‘refers to the standardization of the thing itself – such as that of the Western, familiar to every movie-goer – and to the rationalization of distribution techniques, but not strictly to the production process’ (p. 14). Following their lines of argument, Poell et al. (2022) concerns about the standardization of cultural commodities ‘are just pressing today—if not more so – than they were in the era of legacy media monopolies’ (p. 137) in this book. In the first half of the book, they outline how technological and economic objectives of platforms set boundaries for cultural

production. In Chapter 6, they further explore how certain types of data-based operational logic contribute to the standardization of cultural commodities on platforms. However, the authors do not see platforms as the only force at play in the process of cultural production; instead, they alert readers about to the entanglement between legacy media companies and platforms, as the editorial and curatorial practices of mass media are now embedded in a platform environment and are informed by platform data metrics.

Secondly, these two books also situate their analysis into understanding culture as practices of meaning-making in everyday life. Culture, in this sense, shows its inextricable connection to ‘meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their historical conditions and relationship’ (Hall, 1980: 63). *Platforms and Cultural Production* examines the roles of platforms without losing sight of the agency of cultural producers and the social environment in which their creative practices are rooted. The authors take on an approach that allows for ‘greater recognition of complexity, contestation and ambivalence in the study of cultural production’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2019: 98). The richness of materials throughout this book enables them to attend sensitively to the socio-political conditions when discussing cultural works on digital platforms across different geographic regions. For instance, the book positions research about how content produced by LGBTQ community were banned on TikTok in parallel with research about similar situations happened on YouTube, outlining the power platforms have to elevate or eliminate voices of marginalized social groups (Poell et al., 2022: 168). Elsewhere in the book, the authors incorporate studies of Douyin (the Chinese local counterpart of TikTok) into their investigation, giving an example of how the platform actively promotes grassroots content that is aligned with mainstream political ideology (Poell et al., 2022: 176). By doing so, the complex relations between platform companies, state actors, and cultural groups such as LGBTQ creators, are unveiled.

Similarly, in *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*, Leaver et al. (2020) state that ‘there are many different cultural groups and practices deploying quite different norms, which is a long way from any singular notion of an all-encompassing Instagram culture or community’ (p. 137) and offer a glimpse into some emerging practices on the platform. The cases listed in Chapters 5 and 6 range from underpaid teachers to politicians who use Instagram to advocate certain ideas, teenagers who use the platform for dating, and parents who post ultrasounds and photos of their children. Presenting these cases opens conversations around a few issues that escape the attention of many platform studies scholars, such as the lack of legal protection for child influencers.

Overall, these two books show similar strengths in their systematic analyses on the topic of platforms and culture, offering detailed accounts of how platforms operate and how culture emerges from the interaction between cultural producers, or influencers, and platforms. What is particularly valuable about both books is that they present many cases and examples outside of the Western context. These cases and examples not only offer a comparative perspective in both books, but also show how platformization of cultural production has become a global phenomenon. Moreover, both books engage diverse strands of scholarship from disciplines and fields such as critical algorithm studies, cultural studies, anthropology, and sociology in their analyses. Therefore, these two books will be valuable reference books for students in the field of media and cultural studies.

They may also inspire researchers and practitioners in related fields to understand how culture is created and modulated on platforms, and how culture can be studied in the platform environment.

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