The Platform Economy. How Japan Transformed the Consumer Internet

Marc Steinberg

Reviewer and Corresponding Author:

Alberto Lusoli, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC, Canada. alusoli@sfu.ca.

Word count: 942

Platforms are an increasingly salient topic in Science and Technology Studies,

management, communication, and media studies. The term 'platform' itself has become

a broad signifier employed across disciplines to read and make sense of social, cultural,

and economic formations. At the same time, platform studies are too often focused on

the material dimension of the phenomenon. The technological perspective is indeed

relevant and interesting, but if we aim to broaden our understanding of this

phenomenon, we must move past the technological dimension of platforms and instead

approach them as a discourse. Steinberg's 'Platform Economy' can act as a good first

step in this direction. The book offers what the author calls a 'transactional' perspective

on platforms. Through it, the author demonstrates and engages critically with the

histories, practices, principles, and politics of platforms.

Marc Steinberg's perspective on the subject is both alternative and

complementary to what the current, ever expanding literature on platforms currently

provides, such as the MIT book series curated by Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost (2009-

2019). Steinberg does this by moving away from the Silicon Valley perspective

glamourized by media and scholars alike and instead focuses on how the Japanese

telecommunication industry of the 90s innovated the distribution of digital contents

across the mobile Internet.

Instead of tackling the platform issue head on, Steinberg begins by charting the

formation of the contents discourse. Steinberg does it by penning an intriguing

retrospective on how Japanese managerial and business literature employed the term

'contents' (*kontentsu,* in the plural form) to identify a new category of information, one

that escaped and displaced the classic juxtaposition between hardware and software.

Through the analysis of grey literature, business books, and marketing materials,

Steinberg describes how 'contents' (plural) came to replace medium specific forms of

content (singular) at a time when the digitalisation of cultural commodities challenged existing forms of intellectual property rights. It was at this point that 'contents' emerged as a new form of commodity perfectly suited for the digital media age. Through digitalisation, 'contents' were rendered independent from their material substratum and were set free to circulate within and across media. Contextually, the platform emerged as the ideal means through which to regulate and discipline the production and consumption of contents. Within the confines of these walled gardens, IP owners could strategically control the diffusion and the monetisation of these new, flexible, and fluid digital commodities.

After defining the relation between contents and platforms as a mutually dependent co-constitutive entity, Steinberg advances his idea for a transactional platform theory. He firstly does this by analysing European and American industrial economic works from the early 2000s regarding multi sided markets. Steinberg also assesses Japanese works from the 1990s in the field of organisational economics and management, particularly in relation to the impact of communication infrastructures on business organisation. Steinberg works to define a transactional theory of platforms disentangled from the material substrate yet also aware and attuned to the operations and economics of platforms. This is a theory that the author defines as 'a-technological', a theory focused on platforms' processes of mediation and their role in market formation rather than on specific technological artifacts. As such, Steinberg analyses the ability of platforms to discipline other economic actors, as well as society as a whole, to fit their mediating protocols. Relying on Actor-Network Theory vocabulary, we could read Steinberg's transactional theory as a means to analyse how platforms problematise, *à la* Callon (1986), contents producers, contents consumers, and non-human digital actants in ways that respond to the strategies of platform operators.

Steinberg's transactional theory is operationalised through the analysis of the i-mode and through the Japanese video sharing platform Niconico. The former was an internet subscription service developed in Japan in 1999 by the telecommunication company Docomo. Through i-mode, users could access a plethora of third-party services such as banking, weather forecast, and flight information directly from their mobile phone. The i-mode was a transactional platform in Steinberg's definition of the term because of the way it regulated the flow of data, commodities, and money between users, third-party content providers, and device manufacturers. As an ante-litteram example of a multi-sided market, the i-mode epitomises Steinberg's relational understanding of platform, meant as a model for organising, mediating, and disciplining. As such, the i-mode was a successful commercial innovation that significantly impacted the Japanese Internet imaginary. It created a conception of the Internet as a site for purchasing contents, services, and goods. This conception was almost incommensurable to the one developed at the same time in western Europe and the US that framed the Internet as the information superhighway and as a bottomless repository of data. Interestingly, the Japanese model of the Internet became paradigmatic in the US and Europe years later with the rise of large content platforms such as iTunes, Netflix, and Amazon. Steinberg's historical work is, in this passage, remarkable for its accuracy, attention to details, and acumen.

The book is a recommended read for scholars in the field of media and beyond. In particular, it is a useful resource for scholars working on digital infrastructures, the governance of digital media, and critical management studies.

References

Montfort, N. and Bogost, I. (Eds.). (2009-2019), *Platform Studies*, MIT Press, Boston, MA, available at: https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/series/platform-studies.

Callon, M. (1986), "Some elements in the sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay", *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge*, pp. 196–223.