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## Introduction: Mapping the evolution of the platform society

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## **Introduction: mapping the evolution of the platform society**

*Cecilia Biancalana, Valentina Goglio*

### **1. Why the platform society needs re-mapping**

Every minute of our everyday lives is now dominated by digital platforms, whether we are at work, on vacation, or caring for others. While writing this introduction – on a shared file hosted by a cloud storage service platform – the smart watch of one of the authors reminded her to take a break and walk to reach the daily target of her personalized exercise plan. During the break she scrolled a social network to get the latest news about the Democratic Party’s candidate at the next USA elections; and while waiting for the bus on the way home she listened to music and podcasts on a streaming platform. The list could go on for pages, and each reader could add numerous other examples. Our social life is tightly linked to multiple digital platforms; platforms in turn, shape and are shaped by the social structure from their onset to their everyday functioning.

This is the sense of the term ‘platform society’, which was coined by Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal in their seminal work (2018) to denote an interconnected ecosystem in which platforms have penetrated the core of society. Platforms no longer only mediate among services, people and goods; they are so closely bound up with society that the aforementioned mutual relationship extends beyond the economy to the culture and the institutions of society. Their work throws light on an inherent conflict between the optimistic narrative painted of techno-evangelism by Silicon Valley leaders, who tend to highlight the benefits of the digital transformation while downplaying the private returns and, on the other hand, the social implications at collective level (Selwyn, 2014).

The term ‘platform’ was borrowed from the tech industry and soon became a new organizational, economic and social paradigm extending well beyond the tech sector, changing the organization of people’s everyday lives (Casilli & Posada, 2019). Despite presenting themselves as ‘neutral’, platforms are so tightly linked to society and able to impact on the social structure that their implications cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the sociological literature on the platform society has reflected upon the several domains in which the transition to the platform paradigm generates concerns.

The seminal work of Zuboff (2019) highlighted the impact of platforms on supporting capital to generate new forms of power, which are less visible and act deceitfully to extract value from users’ information and behavior. Another extensive body of empirical literature has explored

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the impact of platforms on the transformation of labor. It has not only analyzed the risks and perils of the gig economy but also investigated the changing organization of work, including that in the qualified professions (Arcidiacono & Sartori, 2024; Armano et al., 2022; Pais et al., 2021; Schor et al., 2023; Schor & Vallas, 2023; Stark & Pais, 2021). Numerous authors have shed light on the risks of exacerbating inequalities behind the promise of democratizing education by means of ed-tech dominated platform education (Decuyper et al., 2021), and behind the growing presence of platforms in the care sector (Arcidiacono et al., 2022; López Peláez & Kirwan, 2023).

It would fall outside the scope of this book to compile an encompassing overview of the state of research on the platform society. However, given the rapid pace of technological advancement and the pervasive influence of these platforms, we believe it is imperative to constantly reassess and map the evolving landscape of the platform society. Our book arrives at a crucial juncture in 2024, a time when the implications of platformization, as we have seen, are more pronounced than ever. The essays included in this book try to add some new items of knowledge to this burgeoning literature.

The urgency of this endeavor stems from the acknowledgment that several crucial issues, in our opinion, demand closer scrutiny, and are partially overlooked by extant literature. One of the most pressing of these issues is the role of digital literacy and skills. As the digital landscape evolves, so does the necessity for individuals to possess the competencies required to navigate it effectively. Without a robust endowment of digital skills, large segments of the population risk being excluded from the benefits of digitalization, with the consequent exacerbation of existing social inequalities. This is not merely a matter of personal empowerment but a critical issue of equity, since those without adequate digital skills are often left behind in an increasingly digital world.

Moreover, the book aims to highlight how the online world often mirrors – and sometimes amplifies – existing offline disparities. While digital platforms offer new opportunities, they also have the potential to deepen social divides, particularly when access to digital tools and skills is unevenly distributed. The digital divide remains a significant barrier, with disparities in access and participation frequently reflecting broader socioeconomic inequalities (Hargittai, 2021). Addressing these disparities is essential if we are to ensure that the benefits of digital platforms are shared equitably across all segments of society.

In addition to these concerns, this book challenges the notion that technological progress inherently leads to positive outcomes. The evolution of digital platforms is not a straightforward path to societal improvement; instead, it presents a complex landscape where the potential for both positive and negative outcomes exist. The diversity among platforms and the varied ways in which they impact users underscore the importance of avoiding simplistic,

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deterministic views of technology. Each platform operates differently, fostering unique behaviors and outcomes that require careful, context-specific analysis.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated these dynamics by acting as a catalyst for digital transformation across various sectors. The accelerated shift towards digital platforms during and since the pandemic has fundamentally altered how we interact, work, and access services. This rapid digitalization has brought both challenges and opportunities, making it imperative to reassess our understanding of the platform society in this new context.

## **2. Structure of the book**

This book originates from two international workshops organized by the editors at the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society of the University of Turin within the framework of the research project “The risks of the platform society: inequality, discrimination, manipulation”, funded by the University of Turin (“Grant for Internationalization - GFI” for collaborative research projects with international partners 2022). The project examined the evolution of the challenges and opportunities presented by the platform society through a multidisciplinary lens within the realm of social and political sciences. The scholars who participated in the workshops had diverse backgrounds within the social sciences and not only brought to the discussion new evidence for the analysis of established topics (such as education, journalism, and politics), but also explored emerging challenges, including e.g. those related to social work and the environment. Another added value of the workshops consisted in the fact that they did not merely identify the risks associated with the platformization of society and politics; they also explored potential solutions and best practices to navigate the digital transformation. By encompassing case studies and analyses at the EU level as well as from countries and regions traditionally less represented in the literature (e.g. Italy, Spain and Portugal), the project offered a global perspective on the evolving opportunities and challenges posed by the platform society.

Coherently with the multidisciplinary lens that characterized the project, this book comprises nine chapters divided into five sections that seek to chart the evolution of the platform society across various domains. The five sections are: education, discrimination, media, institutions, and environment, an emerging new field of conflict for the platform society.

Section 1 (*Education*) provides novel evidence on the potential of platforms in the education and lifelong learning sector. The chapters in this section, "Collective Learning: Exploring the Educational Benefits of Collective Intelligence" by Pablo Bautista, Javier Fernández, and Tatiana Íñiguez Berrozpe, and "A Better Skilled Workforce for the Digital Transformation: What Role for Platform Education?" by Valentina Goglio, highlight the benefits of collaborative learning and examine the landscape of online training across Europe.

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In the chapter "Collective Learning: Exploring the Educational Benefits of Collective Intelligence," the authors analyze a successful practice that leverages collective intelligence to develop digital competences and manage the potential risks associated with social networks, such as fake news, sexting, cyberbullying, and hate speech. The concept of collective learning is based on the principle that the average performance of a group working collectively is superior to the individual performance of each of its members. The online environment further enhances this process by significantly increasing the number of participants in groups.

The chapter introduces a collective learning tool called the 'Collective Learning Platform'. This platform is designed to generate quality solutions to complex problems or tasks by harnessing collective intelligence through successive digital social interactions. Its aim is to equip students with the skills and competencies needed to navigate and mitigate digital risks. The chapter recounts that, by participating in various sessions on the platform, Spanish students were able to engage in collaborative problem-solving and critical thinking exercises that enhanced their understanding and management of digital challenges.

The chapter by Valentina Goglio provides an overview of the distribution of online lifelong learning, encompassing online courses and learning materials, among the European working-age population. We know that workers' skills significantly influence macroeconomic prospects at the country level, while at the micro level, a lack of the skills needed to keep pace with the rapid evolution of productive systems can adversely affect workers' job market opportunities and career trajectories. Within this context, digital tools have increasingly made online courses and learning materials accessible. But is this accessibility universal and equitable? The chapter examines the distribution of participation in online learning across different countries and investigates whether traditional social cleavages that affect participation in lifelong learning persist in the digital age. The findings indicate that better-educated individuals have greater chances of utilizing these resources. At the macro level, the distribution of online lifelong learning across countries mirrors the traditional patterns of participation in adult and lifelong learning, suggesting that existing educational inequalities are reproduced in the digital learning landscape.

Section 2 (*Discrimination*) confronts the challenges and risks faced by marginalized communities in the digital realm. It dissects the use of digital devices and platforms in social work and explores online hate speech targeting gender-normative defiance in popular media events. This section includes "The Use of Digital Devices and Digital Platforms in Social Work: Challenges and Risks" by Giovanni Cellini, and "Made in Italy: Online Hate Speech Targeting Gender-Normative Defiance at the Sanremo Music Festival" by Camilla Borgna and Antonio Martella.

With respect to social work, we know that ICTs have a significant impact on it, influencing both professional practices in relationships with clients and broader processes of social

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exclusion and inclusion. In his chapter, Giovanni Cellini addresses the definitions of digitalization in social work, its applications in various contexts of professional practice, as well as the advantages, challenges, and ethical implications associated with it. On the one hand, digitalization poses risks such as privacy and security concerns, the potential loss of the emotional and physical dimensions of the helping relationship, increased discrimination against vulnerable individuals who may not receive necessary in-person interventions, and the risk of neglecting the importance of maintaining an adequate number of social workers in direct contact with the community within the welfare system. On the other hand, it has benefits such as the following: enhancing access to social work services that are otherwise unavailable due to geographical distance, clients' disabilities, or illnesses; enabling the real-time monitoring of clients' status, and rapid response when appropriate; providing more cost-effective delivery of social work services; facilitating communication; and reducing the need for clients to travel to obtain services. Underpinning these considerations is the ongoing challenge of the digital divide, which social work must address in order to ensure equitable access to digital resources.

The chapter "Made in Italy: Online Hate Speech Targeting Gender-Normative Defiance at the Sanremo Music Festival" examines a specific risk of the online environment: online hate speech. This can be defined as a form of communication, including text, videos, and photos, that expresses hatred or degrading attitudes toward individuals or groups based on their gender identity, sexual orientation, body shape, race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, or other social identity factors. Against this backdrop, the chapter explores an under-researched area in the literature: comparison among social media platforms of online behaviors. It highlights that platforms differ in at least three factors that may affect the amount of online hate speech and counter-reactions to it: their typical content and usage, users' demographics, and moderation and censorship policies. Through a case study involving a public figure (a singer) who challenged traditional gender norms during a mainstream televised event in Italy and subsequently became the target of violent attacks both online and offline, the chapter demonstrates that social network platforms are not all the same. The analysis focuses on online reactions to the event across three social media platforms where the singer was active, revealing significant differences among these platforms in the nature and extent of online hate speech. This study underscores the importance of understanding platform-specific dynamics to effectively address and mitigate online hate speech.

Section 3 (*Media*) ventures into the evolving landscape of news dissemination. This section provides insights into the future of journalism in the digital age by unpacking the TikTokization of news production and addressing cases of local journalism gaps and disinformation. It comprises two chapters: "Can I Have Some News? Local Journalism Gaps and the Role of Platforms" by Pedro Jerónimo and Luísa Torre, and "TikTokization of the News: News Media Content Production Strategies in Portugal" by Antonio Martella and Pedro Jerónimo.

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In their chapter, Jerónimo and Torre discuss the phenomenon of ‘news deserts’ which are communities where residents have very limited access to critical and credible local news and information essential for grassroots democracy and social cohesion. The rise of news deserts is closely linked to platform competition. As platforms increasingly position themselves as intermediaries between audiences and the information they seek, regional media face stronger competition, losing their centrality as news and information providers. As a consequence, in the last decade platforms have become key actors also in the local information ecosystem, often prioritizing low-quality content over journalistic information that serves as a watchdog of local authorities. This shift carries significant risks. At a local level, the lack of journalism coverage leads to decreased scrutiny of local institutions, increased vulnerability to disinformation, hate speech, and populism on social media, and a growing sense of suspicion and confusion among the public. However, the chapter also notes that in the absence of traditional media, information still circulates through other means. In municipalities without journalists, much of the local information is disseminated through social media platforms like Facebook pages and groups. These platforms provide content that helps build communities: they share critical local information and encourage community members to take actions that benefit society. In summary, social media platforms can also play a central role in the context of news deserts, facilitating citizens' access to information about their immediate environment.

The theme of the platformization of journalism is also central to the chapter "TikTokization of the News: News Media Content Production Strategies in Portugal". The platformization of journalism has compelled news media to adapt to network media logic, thereby affecting journalistic practices and norms. This shift has reinforced or introduced several challenges for media outlets, including heightened competition for attention, increased news avoidance, and – as anticipated – the rise of social media as primary news sources. Moreover, media organizations must produce content according to algorithmic curation practices to intercept niche audiences’ newsfeeds across various platforms, and the gatekeeping function performed by the interaction between algorithms and audience preferences creates a highly unbalanced power relationship between platforms and media outlets. Against this backdrop, the chapter makes the first attempt to statistically identify the production strategies adopted by major Portuguese media on TikTok.

Section 4 (*Institutions*) shifts the focus to the digital transformation of governments and democracies. The chapters "E-Government, Digital and Financial Literacy: Insights from Cross-Country Data" by Anna Lo Prete, and "Turning the Tables Again? Paid Social Media as a New Campaign Environment" by Enea Fiore, Daniela R. Piccio, and Antonella Seddone, examine through a comparative lens the intersection among e-government, digital literacy, and financial literacy, and the emergence of paid social media as a new political campaign environment and its implications for democracy.

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The development of government initiatives that leverage digital platforms to deliver public services is a significant feature of the platform society. On the one hand, civic engagement through e-government platforms provides citizens with new opportunities to participate in the social and political life of their community. On the other hand, digital citizenship and the digitalization of public services can raise barriers against individuals with lower digital competence. The chapter by Anna Lo Prete presents descriptive evidence on the relationship between e-government development across countries and levels of digital and financial literacy. The results indicate that e-government is most prevalent in countries with higher digital and financial literacy. Given, however, that the average level of digital literacy remains quite low, many citizens often struggle to navigate e-government platforms. E-government is not always aligned with the cognitive skills required for individuals to navigate online independently and understand policy trade-offs, and this misalignment can significantly hinder the development of inclusive and critically independent e-citizenship through online platforms.

At the same time, digital platforms owned by private firms have become prominent actors within contemporary democracies. Their potential to compromise the integrity of electoral processes is significant, because the accessibility of the personal data of users engaging on these platforms has facilitated the design of highly advanced political advertising tools: indeed, digital advertising strategies can utilize personalized information about individuals to devise micro-targeting strategies. The growing use of big data technologies and micro-targeting tools by political parties and leaders to influence voters' perceptions, particularly in the run-up to significant electoral events, has prompted inquiries into the manipulation and integrity of the electoral process, intensified political polarization, and enabled the spread of misinformation. The events surrounding Cambridge Analytica, Brexit, and the 2016 US elections have catalyzed the demand for the European Union to develop regulatory instruments to tackle the risks associated with the abuse of online political advertising. In the chapter "Turning the Tables Again? Paid Social Media as a New Campaign Environment" the authors examine the Transparency and Political Advertising Regulation (TPA), a significant change in the relationship between EU institutions and platform services. The TPA acknowledges the role and responsibility of institutions in addressing specific dysfunctional mechanisms that may threaten democratic processes. It introduces transparency provisions in political advertising and states that targeting techniques involving the processing of personal data are permitted only with explicit consent and when such techniques do not involve profiling.

Finally, section 5 (*Environment*) charts a research agenda that assesses the risks of the platform society for the environment. In an era defined by environmental challenges, this section conducts a pioneering examination of the environmental implications of the digital age. It includes "Environmental Challenges in the Platform Society: Insights from the Mobilizations Against Data Centers" by Cecilia Biancalana. This chapter analyzes mobilizations against data centers, large edifices that house the servers driving the digital realm. These mobilizations and

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conflicts, situated at the intersection between digital and environmental realms across various geographical and sociopolitical contexts, highlight several key issues. Specifically, the chapter discusses questions related to data nationalism and data colonialism, illustrating how the digital world is intricately tied to issues of territorial sovereignty. More broadly, the chapter encourages study of the environmental impacts of ICTs, a field still underexplored in political science but increasingly important because the ICT sector accounts for approximately 2.1%-3.9% of global GHG emissions. Political intervention will be crucial in mitigating these emissions.

### **3. Platform society: key topics for a research agenda**

The chapters of the book highlight several crucial issues. One recurring theme is the role of **digital literacy and digital skills**, emphasizing their importance for navigating the digital world effectively and equitably. The objective of the Collective Learning Platform described in the chapter "Collective Learning: Exploring the Educational Benefits of Collective Intelligence" was to enable young students who participated in various sessions to acquire skills and competencies with which to manage digital risks more appropriately. However, cultivating digital skills is crucial not only for the young but also for the elderly, who are most susceptible to the digital divide. These skills are also essential in the training of social workers, as Giovanni Cellini discusses in his chapter.

Valentina Goglio's chapter highlights as a key policy area the need for a more skilled workforce and the upgrading of workers' qualifications with both technical and adaptive skills. Among these latter, digital and ICT skills are essential for the future workforce and can be provided by platform education. However, digital skills are not only vital in the workplace. Anna Lo Prete emphasizes in her chapter that basic competencies needed to use e-platforms should be strengthened through educational and training programs in order to share the benefits of digitalized public services and civic engagement without incurring the dangers posed by digital technologies. Otherwise, the innovations brought by e-government will be useless. Moreover, transparency regulations for political advertising on social media, such as those outlined in the TTPA, are ineffective without a corresponding increase in digital skills. Similarly, as Jeronimo and Torre remind us, the effective use of social media platforms by citizens to fill the information void in news deserts depends on their technical skills and prior experience in using such platforms to navigate these information ecosystems properly.

The book also demonstrates how online inequalities often reflect offline disparities, impacting access and participation. Valentina Goglio's chapter shows that traditional social cleavages affecting participation in lifelong learning persist in the online world, as better-educated individuals have greater chances of using online learning resources. Similarly, Anna Lo Prete's chapter indicates that higher values of e-government are recorded in higher-income countries,

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and that the digitalization of public services can represent a barrier for less competent individuals. Additionally, news deserts are often found in peripheral and marginalized communities, exacerbating information inequality. Also the choice of locations for installing digital infrastructures, such as data centers, often reproduces pre-existing inequalities. This is exemplified by the Chilean case presented in the chapter by Cecilia Biancalana, which introduces the concept of data colonialism.

More broadly, Giovanni Cellini reminds us that technological innovation does not automatically guarantee progress towards social justice, and that social work has an ethical duty to ensure that technological evolution is inclusive and does not amplify existing inequalities. The digital gap and online divisions perpetuate power imbalances and privileges both within and beyond the realm of social work.

Moreover, the **diversity among digital platforms** and the importance of **avoiding technological determinism** – where technological innovation is presumed to lead to a specific outcome – are key focuses of the book. Platforms are not homogeneous, and analyzing their specific affordances is essential for understanding their unique impacts and functions. For instance, in the chapter "Made in Italy: Online Hate Speech Targeting Gender-Normative Defiance at the Sanremo Music Festival," it is shown that hate speech is much more prevalent on Facebook than on other platforms. Conversely, TikTok emerges as the least 'hateful' environment, with most of the negative sentiment expressed being related to sadness or disappointment. Furthermore, the chapter "TikTokization of the News: News Media Content Production Strategies in Portugal" illustrates that media must produce content according to algorithmic curation practices, which vary from platform to platform.

Another important argument advanced in the book challenges the assumption that a particular characteristic of the platform society will necessarily lead to a particular outcome, such as the notion that anonymity always fosters negative behavior. For instance, students involved in the Collective Learning Platform appreciated the opportunity to express their ideas and feelings anonymously. They valued being able to give their opinions without restrictions and to find others who agreed with their arguments on the platform. The ability to express themselves without being negatively affected by their relationships was highly valued. In contrast, Borgna and Martella highlight that the online context facilitates the expression and spread of negative behavior by making it easier to maintain anonymity and to access broader audiences. This is particularly the case of social media platforms, where individuals can connect with each other while avoiding face-to-face interactions, especially on platforms that strongly support anonymity.

Finally, the book addresses the **changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic**, detailing how it has accelerated digital transformation and altered the dynamics of online

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interactions and services. For instance, several chapters show that the use of the internet for online courses and learning materials in Europe exhibits a marked increase corresponding with the pandemic period, thus highlighting the critical role of digital platforms in education. The acceleration of digitalization during the pandemic has also been significant for the welfare system and social professions by acting as a catalyst for the digitalization of social services. This transformation has reshaped the manner in which social workers interact with clients and deliver services, emphasizing the need for digital competencies in the profession. In some local newsrooms, the pandemic has prompted journalists to adopt a digital-first mindset that has fundamentally changed news production and dissemination practices. E-government initiatives also received further impetus during the COVID-19 pandemic, because lockdowns and movement restrictions induced governments to devise effective digital solutions to ensure the provision of public services. This reinforces the need to update the literature on the platform society in the post-COVID era, acknowledging the profound impact of the pandemic on digitalization across various sectors.

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