Platform business poses risks for news publishers

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News publishers have problems with their distribution. This is the case despite an abundance of opportunities in the digital mediascape, or perhaps more rightfully put, much because of the vast growth of opportunities to access and engage with content online and via platforms and mobile apps. Publishers' distribution and audience engagement has, to varying extents, become subsumed into platforms' digital infrastructures, acting as intermediaries. This is associated with a significant disruption to the publisher's business model, with the ongoing overall deterioration of advertising revenues. Previously, broadcasters were accustomed to broadcasting their news on their channels to reach significant audiences. Newspaper companies acquired a printing press and logistics for delivering their printed papers to stores as well as subscribers. Their competitive advantages were associated with owning and controlling their distribution, with high barriers to entry into the market. However, amid digitalization and platformization, things have changed tremendously. At first, publishers developed news sites from the mid-1990s, remaining in control when it comes to matters such as the digital design, the prioritization of article positioning, size of images, and the placement of advertisements. They could use their own analytics infrastructures or subscribe to a third-party service for metrics. This too has changed.

The year 2008 marks a milestone for mobile ecosystems, with the introduction of app stores for Apple iOS and Android, as well as a global rollout of touchscreen-enabled smartphones using these mobile ecosystems. Around this time, social media platforms including YouTube, Facebook and Twitter rolled out globally, and more have followed. Moreover, Google has continued expanding its portfolio, and its parent company Alphabet runs numerous search and web services ranging from cloud-hosted productivity tools to a massive advertising infrastructure as well as AndroidCar as a platform for car manufacturers. In addition to search and social media platforms, services similar to Spotify and Netflix have been introduced in recent years to aid news subscriptions (e.g., Amazon Prime Reading on Kindle, Apple News+, Readly and Cafeyn/LeKiosk). News bundles for platforms can be appealing to news users, as they can with one registration/subscription, easily find a multitude of news from diverse publishers. These platform services also use audience analytics and metrics to operate personalized recommender systems, making customized suggestions for information that is likely to suit users' preferences. For simplicity, we will hereafter write *platforms* when referring to social media, search engines and mobile ecosystems, most of which are owned and run by a small set of wealthy companies based in the United States. The rise of platforms marks a disruption for publishers and the news industry.

Struggling to attract news users to their own channels, there has long been a mantra that publishers need to be where their audiences are. Publishers have sought to 'be' with their audiences by building a presence on platforms that are popular with their public, striving towards driving attention, stimulating audience engagement, and traffic to their proprietary platforms (see Steensen and Westlund 2021). Researchers have studied this in terms of a shift from editorially driven news work and logics with publishing on platforms proprietary to the news media, to creating and/or customizing news contents for algorithms and platforms non-proprietary to the news media. Specifically, scholars have studied how publishers employ strategies in their approaches to publishing and/or redistributing news for platforms (Hermida 2018).

Over time, it has become clear that this strategy has been detrimental, with publishers largely losing profits, marked by drastic declines in their print advertising and limited success with online advertising. Simultaneously, platforms have increased their profits and their relative power in the market. Global platform companies Alphabet (Google AdSense) and Meta (Ads Manager) have essentially taken over online advertising. This chapter focuses on the funding of journalism in an age of platforms. The relative importance of advertising and reader revenues are shifting: news users, rather than advertisers, constitute the main source of funding for a growing number of commercial publishers (Olsen et al. 2021). Critical of long-term effects, more publishers are engaging in *platform counterbalancing*, seeking to reduce their dependence on specific non-proprietary platforms by configuring what they do for different platforms. Ultimately, there are parallel processes of *platformization* and *de-platformization* among publishers.

These relationships are evolving. The interdependencies between both publishers and platforms naturally change over time (Chua and Westlund 2019, 2022; Nielsen & Ganter 2022), and are marked by heterogeneity (Nielsen and Ganter 2018, 2022; Sehl et al. 2021; Steensen and Westlund 2021). For example, Myllylahti (2023) analyses four distinct types of publishers: 1) independents, 2) shareholder owned, 3) local news providers, and 4) public broadcasters. She argues that platforms have multiple and often simultaneous roles in the media ecosystem, and these roles are perceived differently by publishers because they have different goals and expectations on these interrelations.

Platformization and evolving publisher-platform relationships

Platformization has become a key concept for the study of platforms in society, and its economic, political and socio-economic consequences have been analysed by scholars across multiple disciplines. In her pioneering work, Helmond (2015) discusses how stakeholders process their data to be 'platform-ready'. Poell et al. (2019, 5-6) define platformization as "the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors", and "the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around platforms". Increasingly, political economy scholarship is addressing how platforms exploit societies and markets, for instance, via data surveillance and labour exploitation (van Dijck et al. 2018; Nieborg et al. 2019). For the news industry, platformization reflects how platforms have gained a dominant influence over publishers, and concomitantly, how publishers have become dependent on platforms. Platforms serve as intermediaries between publishers and their audiences; as providers of technologies such as audience analytics; and as platform infrastructures for which news is customized and optimized (Seipp et al. 2023).

Amid platformization, a relatively positive discourse around platforms as opportunities for publishers saw many of them invest time and resources to develop their so-called platform presence. Adopting a pro-innovation bias, a number of scholars examining the publisher-platform relationship argued, normatively, the "best" way forward for publishers involved them innovating and adapting what they do in relation to platforms and their infrastructures (see review in Steensen and Westlund 2021). In line with Helmond's observation (2015), many publishers have engaged in processes to become platform-ready, increasingly turning to datafication and data-driven newswork (Ekström et al. 2022). With much of the "audience engagement with news taking place on social media platforms, publishers have become dependent on platforms for analytics and metrics, with platforms functioning as digital intermediaries between publishers and their audiences.

Ultimately, journalism scholars have largely focused on how journalists and publishers' approach and appropriate social media platforms, contributing to their building of platform presence. It has taken time for studies with more critically oriented approaches towards platforms to emerge. To our best knowledge, Poell and van Dijck (2014) co-authored the first publication providing a substantial critical analysis of journalism, platforms, and (in)dependence. They argue that the shift from editorial to algorithmic logic is compromising, rather than enhancing, democracy. They write,

> in contrast to what most current research suggests, they are not *neutral* technologies that merely *enable* user activity. Instead, social platforms very much *shape* how users share

> information, curate news, and express their points of view, as well as how these activities—in the form of social media metrics—start to play a role in the production and dissemination of news (Poell and van Dijck 2014, 182)

In recent years, automation and AI have gained significance in newsrooms and in editorial processes, and publishers making use of technologies owned and controlled by third-parties are essentially enabling other actors to directly influence their editorial decision-making (Simon 2022; van Drunen and Fechner 2022).

Publishers are painfully aware of platform power, and some have experienced firsthand how platforms articulate their powerful positions on the market through direct contact with publishers. Westlund (2016) showed this in the Swedish case, and Nechushtai (2018) emphasized this by asking "Could digital platforms capture the media through infrastructure?" In the article, she discusses "infrastructural capture" (cf. Plantin et al. 2018). Likewise, Helberger (2020) has argued that platforms also have tremendous opinion power. A pioneering empiric study with a critical emphasis on the publisher-platform relationship of a large, legacy European publisher by Nielsen and Ganter (2018) argues that rather than taking a journalism research perspective focusing on how publishers and journalists *appropriate* digital technology into their practices and organizational arrangements, a platform studies approach reveals how publishers *adapt* to platforms and their infrastructures, systems and services. They found that this publisher, once an independent institution with control over its communication and distribution, had become dependent on platforms. This highlights a tension between long-term strategic worries and short-term operational opportunities, which Chua and Westlund (2019) also reflect in a study of two Singaporean publishers. For these publishers, there was a dramatic shift between 2015/2016 and 2018, from trying to boost their social media platform presence, to becoming more restrictive with the redistribution of content on external platforms, and working towards improving their own proprietary platforms. The authors describe this as *platform counterbalancing*.

Platform counterbalancing refers to how contemporary publishers strategically attempt to balance or reduce their dependence on external platforms, which includes shifting focus from driving traffic, digital advertising and social media engagement towards converting readers into loyal subscribers. Conversion of social media audience engagement into reader revenues, however, comes with costs and difficulties (Cornia et al. 2018). Myllylahti (2018) concludes that while publishers attempt to diversify their revenue streams and counterbalance platform associated risks, many have fallen into an attention trap in their dealings with Facebook. To reach bigger audiences, publishers seek out presence on third-party platforms, making counterbalancing efforts challenging. Counterbalancing essentially runs against platforms' abilities. Through analytics tools, platforms encourage a dependence on them by fostering competition among journalists and publishers. On the individual level, journalists turn to platform metrics to validate what they do. At the industry level, publishers closely monitor competitors' social media performance, mimicking each other's "best practices" to out-perform each other based on performance data (Chua and Westlund 2022). Public service media (PSM) also turn to platforms to improve audience reach, targeting specific groups they need to reach as part of their public mandates. A study of German public service broadcasters shows that Facebook represents an uneasy bedfellow (Steiner et al. 2019), and Sehl, Cornia and Nielsen (2021) refer to platforms as "frenemies". Platformization, and how publishers appropriate and/or adapt their practices, is connected to the dislocation of news journalism and the reduction of control over publishing contexts, influencing the epistemology of journalism (Ekström and Westlund 2019). Publishers have reconfigured their epistemic practices, expanding their publishing and distribution for platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and optimizing their digital content and websites for search engines.

Ultimately, a more critical area of research into publishers and platforms has begun to emerge, placing emphasis on interrelationships and the inherent power dependencies that surface between these actors (Nielsen and Ganter 2022; Steensen and Westlund 2021). New strands of research have emerged to investigate more closely how monetary relations between publishers and platforms are shaped by different platform roles. As a part of the wider platform-publisher framework, platforms have two clear monetary roles as *payers* and *profiteers* of journalism and news publishing (Myllylahti, 2023).

Over the past five years, publishers have been trying to compensate for advertising losses. Publishers have increasingly concentrated on building digital reader revenue through subscriptions, memberships and donations, and they have utilized platforms to do so (Myllylahti 2020). There are tensions at play, with publishers treating platforms as "frenemies". Platform companies possess significant power and are in charge and control when it comes to visibility, audience analytics and monetization on their platforms (Nielsen and Ganter 2022), resulting in publishers navigating this terrain by simultaneously building a presence on specific platforms, yet seeking to avoid becoming too dependent on individual platforms and platform companies. Platforms provide publishers with distribution channels and tools that aid reader revenue building, but the platforms also dominate audience attention monetization. They offer publishers a place for content promotion and revenue creation, but they also profit from publishers' content. Partly because platforms profit from news content and audiences, they have become unwilling payers of news for a selection of publishers. The platforms' roles as *profiteers* and *payers* are further unpacked here because most publishers engage with platforms to gain attention, traffic, subscriptions, training, tools and revenue, and these are interlinked. The next section focuses on the two roles of platforms, starting with *profiteers* and then proceeding to *payers.*

Platforms as profiteers

Publishers' drive to monetize audiences via platforms seems logical when considering where audiences are consuming and paying attention to news. Meta/Facebook and Google/YouTube are major platforms for news consumption, with one-third of adults consuming news regularly on these platforms (Auxier and Anderson 2021; Walker and Matsa 2021). *The Reuters Digital News Report 2022* shows that Facebook has remained the most influential platform for news consumption with 30 percent of people surveyed in 12 countries consuming news on it. Additionally, 19 percent consumed news on YouTube (Newman et al. 2022). This means that Facebook and Google are able to monetize publishers' audience's attention and their user data by selling them for a profit to third parties throughout their services, including Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube. When previously news publishers monopolized advertising markets and controlled golden rivers of profit, digitalisation of media changed the landscape. Now, the digital advertising market is dominated by platforms. In Australia, Google and Facebook have an 80 percent market share in digital advertising (ACCC 2021), while in the UK, both platforms have been found to earn an estimated £1 billion in revenue a year from publishers (Elliott 2022). Both platform companies argue that they deliver substantial monetary benefits to publishers without profiting from the news. Google and Facebook continue to maintain that they are not taking money away from news publishers, but they are actually sending money toward news organizations by providing them with more traffic and opportunities to build up digital subscription revenue. However, platforms *do* profit from news content, if not directly, then indirectly (Myllylahti, 2023). Platforms collect vast amounts of data about people who consume news on their services, and they publish content produced by journalists, so the argument that they do not profit from the news needs to be contested. Both companies claim that news forms an insignificant proportion of their overall content, and that their revenue and profit derived from news content are limited. Yet, platforms, who have either been coerced by regulatory threats or mandated by the law, have started to pay some publishers for their content.

Platforms as payers

While publishers have different goals and strategies in their platform relations, one thing that unites them is a belief that platforms ought to pay for their content. In Australia, platforms are *mandated* by the law to pay publishers for content, and Canada and the United Kingdom are considering similar obligatory payments. In several European markets, platforms have initiated payments to publishers due to changes in copyright laws. In some countries, regulatory threats have *coerced* platforms to pay selected publishers. Generally, platform payments vary in form and size have been targeted at different news operators, including independent publishers, shareholder-owned publishers, local news providers and private/public broadcasters. How platform payments affect news providers, and how they are perceived by them, depends on the strategies and goals of individual publishers, both commercial and PSM (Myllylahti, 2023; Nielsen and Cherubini 2022).

Publishers have adopted the ‘we take what we can’ attitude, acknowledging that the benefits may be short-term, an attitude described as “platform pragmatism” (Nielsen and Cherubini 2022). As one New Zealand publisher puts it: “we take all we can get even if it is for a short period of time” (Myllylahti, 2023).While independent publishers pursue payments from platforms, their overall platform strategies differ, and outcomes of platform funding vary. Some independent publishers have successfully negotiated content payment deals with Google and Facebook, while others have engaged with only one platform, or with the specific platform tools and services that best matches their goals and values. Shareholder-owned publishers are driven by profit and, therefore, have largely pursued content payments from both platforms, and accepted training and tools from them to maximize revenue. However, platform payments may not provide substantial additional income and profit for these publishers, consisting of 1–7 percent of their overall revenue (Myllylahti, 2023). Local publishers have either individually, or collectively pursued payment deals with platforms to gain ‘the best possible deals’, but the value of these deals remains low. In Australia and New Zealand, public broadcasters have made content payment deals with platforms, so Google and Facebook have essentially become payers of taxpayer-funded news providers. This poses a serious risk because financing PSM with platform funding muddles boundaries between public/private media, which may contribute to declining trust in the news. While publishers’ platform strategies are heterogeneous, they are commonly aware of the risks related to the platforms’ payer role, and they acknowledge that the benefits may be short-term. Already, Meta has decided to stop news payments in the US, leaving major news publishers such as The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal, $100 million out of pocket.

Four key risk areas for publishers amid platform power

In recent years, researchers have advanced critical research of platformization in terms of its dysfunctional effects on publishers’ businesses. Many publishers have become dependent on platforms for distribution and audience engagement, and run the risk of being over-reliant on platforms. Scholars of (digital) journalism have examined publishers’ and journalists’ dependence on platforms, with their structures, algorithms and procedures, focusing on practices related to news work, publishing and distribution. News content has been, and still is, tailored by many publishers to suit social media platforms Moreover, PSM use platforms to gain legitimacy, while commercial publishers use them to generate profits. The financial outlook for publishers remains grim, and publishers are working towards reducing their dependence on platforms. We conclude this chapter by discussing key risks associated with four different areas of publishers' business of digital journalism, amid the dependence on platforms and their power.

I. ***Risks of news production:*** Platforms attract billions of users daily and can serve as important entry points for epistemic practices in news work. While platforms edit and moderate content, and publish third-party content, their practices have become similar to publishers. Because platforms do not produce news content, many publishers see them merely as infrastructures or/and distribution channels for news. However, this view should be contested because of their close engagement with editorial practices. Although platforms may have limited power over journalists and the news they produce, news production can be influenced by platforms as journalists engage with platforms in news gathering, and are influenced by platform technologies that provide data on popular trends and topics. Publishers are influenced by platformization insofar as some reorganize their priorities and change their journalistic practices based on platforms' governance structures and the likelihood that their content will be successful on these platforms. Moreover, amid the growing use of automation and AI in news work, we must recognize the risks involved when publishers make use of non-proprietary AI systems, displacing influence and control to third-parties such as platform companies. Publishers face risks of becoming dependent on non-proprietary technologies for their news production, which poses challenges to their journalistic autonomy.

II. ***Risks of news distribution***: Publishers enable their users to redistribute the news across social media platforms, and their journalists/editors also cross-promote news. Some publishers produce and publish unique or customized news for social media platforms, following platform logics and economic incentives structures. Some publishers have placed much of their audience engagement on platforms, and much of their online traffic comes from the platforms rather than directly. Publishers continuously face the risk of platforms blackening the news or changing their algorithms substantially, which major platforms have done multiple times, including because of government regulation. There are significant risks involved when publishers depend on (specific) platforms to achieve widespread distribution and engagement. This extends to PSM who actively turn to specific platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok to reach youth, resulting in citizens becoming commercial commodities when consuming PSM news via platforms. Overall, the risks include but are not limited to platforms changing their algorithmic infrastructures, and deleting news content from their platform in line with their policies for content moderation. Using non-proprietary platforms as a major promotion tool for news content has substantial risks, and some publishers have successfully reduced their dependence on these platforms.

III. ***Risks of attention analytics:*** Datafication is prevalent across most corners of the digital mediascape, including that of journalism and news. Recognizing that audience engagement increasingly takes place on platforms non-proprietary to publishers, it is essential to stress publishers' dependence on platforms for gaining access not only to audiences, but also the analytics infrastructures and audience metrics on these platforms. Platforms are in charge insofar that they decide how to measure digital footprints on their platforms, and what metrics they make available to third-parties such as publishers. The different assemblages of audiences, and their shifting attention spans are essential to publishers. Nonetheless, it is risky business for publishers to depend extensively on platforms for insights about their audience engagements, which in some cases represent the bigger part of engagement with the news.

IV. ***Risks of platform funding:*** Audience engagement and metrics is inexorably linked to advertising revenues. It is widely established that Google (Alphabet) and Meta have taken over the larger portion of global online advertising, whereas publishers have a diminished slice of the advertising pie. This has created a digital media ecosystem which is lopsided. While platforms profit from news audiences, they have also become patrons and payers of the news. In several Western markets, platforms are either legally required to pay publishers for content, or regulatory pressures have coerced them to do so. Ultimately, funding journalism and journalistic products with platform payments is risky, because these payments are not substantial and offer only short-term benefits. The global turmoil and inflation have resulted in economic uncertainties and the value of the tech sector on stock markets has fallen sharply. Alphabet, Meta, Twitter and other platform companies have laid off substantial numbers of staff globally, and there is no guarantee platform companies will maintain content payments.

The bottom line is that there is a substantially asymmetrical interrelationship between publishers and platforms, one which has disrupted publishers' traditional business models. Publishers are struggling to fund journalism amid platformization, and as a consequence, journalism's authority and social role is being undermined. Publishers have become dependent on platforms for distribution and audience analytics. In their attempts to reduce dependency, they invest in their proprietary platforms, yet also engage in deals with platforms for funding. Facing economic headwinds, publishers have to remain competitive on the market, yet use resources effectively. Publishers are now navigating ways to improve news production amid emerging AI solutions. We argue it is critically important that publishers adopt a responsible approach to technology. We call for further interdisciplinary research into this area, encouraging (digital) journalism studies scholars to engage with literature emerging in platform studies and infrastructure studies (Plantin et al. 2018; Poell et al. 2019; Poell et al. 2022; Riedl 2022). We invite scholars to engage with this research question, across platforms and cultural contexts: How do publishers, and their different forms of journalism, depend on specific platforms and their diverse sets of digital technologies?

Key Readings

Research adopting a critical approach to the interrelationship between publishers and platforms is emerging. We recommend a 2023 special issue on this theme in *Digital Journalism* (Vol. 11, issue 8). We also recommend reading the recent PhD thesis by Chua (2023) titled "News Publishers' Innovation of Practices Amid Platform Dominance", which offers a rich synthesis of research in the field. Additionally, a book by Merja titled

“From Paper to Platform. How tech giants redefine news and democracy” offers a new kind of framework to evaluate different platform roles and risks in the media ecosystem.

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