Platforms, Data and Trust: Understanding Institutional Power in the Digital Society

Hannah Whitmore, Karim El-Sayed

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Abstract

Digital platforms have become institutional infrastructures for communication, commerce, work, culture, search, advertising, and social participation. Their significance extends beyond individual applications because platforms organize visibility, collect and monetize data, set rules for participation, mediate transactions, and influence how other institutions reach users. This editorial argues that platforms should therefore be analysed as institutions with technical, economic, and governance functions rather than as neutral intermediaries. Algorithmic curation, moderation, advertising systems, data extraction, app ecosystems, and platform labour create informational asymmetries between firms, users, workers, regulators, and researchers. These asymmetries complicate accountability and public trust, while concentration and interoperability choices can reshape market and social power. Research should prioritize independent data access, platform transparency, algorithmic accountability, comparative and longitudinal analysis, data governance, user agency, trustworthy moderation, worker outcomes, and evidence from diverse geographic settings. Understanding platform effects requires connecting algorithms and interface design with business models, regulation, user behaviour, social norms, and institutional dependence.

Keywords: digital platforms; platform governance; algorithmic curation; data governance; platform labour; content moderation; institutional power

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Context and Problem Framing

Digital platforms have become central institutions of contemporary social and economic life. Search engines structure access to information; social platforms organize communication and visibility; app stores govern access to mobile ecosystems; digital marketplaces connect buyers and sellers; content platforms shape cultural distribution; and gig-work platforms allocate tasks, evaluate workers, and mediate payment. Their influence derives not only from scale but from the ability to set technical rules, collect behavioural data, rank content, define categories, and coordinate multiple groups of users. Gillespie (2010) showed early that the term "platform" performs both technical and political work by presenting intermediaries as open foundations while obscuring selective governance. The subsequent expansion of platformization has transformed sectors such as journalism, transport, education, health, retail, and entertainment (van Dijck et al., 2018; Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

Platforms do not simply host activity; they actively organize it. Recommendation systems influence what users see, advertising infrastructures convert attention into revenue, moderation systems define acceptable participation, and data analytics shape product development and commercial targeting. Plantin et al. (2018) argue that large platforms increasingly acquire infrastructural characteristics, while infrastructures are themselves becoming platformized. This convergence helps explain why private technical systems can become difficult for firms, workers, public institutions, and civil society to avoid. The platform's power lies partly in this dependence: it can alter interfaces, ranking rules, fees, APIs, or access conditions with effects that cascade through entire ecosystems.

1.2 Why the Issue Matters

The proposition advanced here is that platforms should be analysed as institutions whose technical and economic architectures govern participation. Platform governance encompasses the rules platforms impose on users and the arrangements through which governments, civil society, and markets seek to govern platforms (Gorwa, 2019). These layers are inseparable because business models influence algorithmic priorities, regulation shapes transparency and competition, user behaviour supplies data, and social norms influence moderation. Trust in digital society therefore depends on more than whether individual users like a service. It depends on whether institutional power is sufficiently visible, contestable, and constrained to support legitimate participation across communication, commerce, and work.

2.0 Current Landscape

2.1 Platform Governance

Platform studies now combines insights from communication, sociology, political economy, information systems, labour studies, law, and infrastructure research. van Dijck et al. (2018) describe platform societies in which public and private sectors become increasingly organized around interconnected platform ecosystems. Poell et al. (2019)

conceptualize platformization as the penetration of platform infrastructures, economic processes, and governance frameworks into multiple domains. This perspective shifts attention from individual companies toward a broader institutional transformation in which datafication, commodification, and selection shape social organization.

Algorithmic curation is central to this transformation. Ranking and recommendation systems manage abundance by deciding which content is visible, to whom, and in what order. Kitchin (2017) emphasizes the methodological difficulty of researching algorithms that are dynamic, distributed, and embedded in wider systems. Bucher (2018) similarly argues that algorithmic power is experienced through changing conditions of visibility and participation rather than only through source code. Cotter (2019) shows how influencers adapt their behaviour to perceived platform rules, illustrating that algorithmic systems can govern indirectly by shaping expectations and strategic practices.

2.2 Datafication

Content moderation constitutes another major institutional function. Gillespie (2018) documents how platforms make continuous judgments about speech, context, harm, and acceptability at enormous scale, while Klonick (2018) characterizes major platforms as new governors that develop quasi-legal rules and enforcement systems. Roberts (2019) draws attention to the hidden labour required to enforce those rules, demonstrating that automated and human moderation are intertwined. Trustworthy moderation therefore depends on policy, labour conditions, appeals, automation, and transparency rather than on classifier accuracy alone.

2.3 Information Intermediation

Platform labour and marketplaces reveal parallel dynamics. Rosenblat and Stark (2016) show how informational asymmetries allow ride-hailing platforms to structure worker behaviour through data and algorithmic management. Wood et al. (2019) find that digital labour platforms can provide flexibility while also intensifying work and economic insecurity. Kenney and Zysman (2016) argue that platform-based business models reorganize markets by positioning intermediaries between producers and consumers. These changes expand economic opportunity in some settings while increasing dependence on privately controlled infrastructures.

2.4 Institutional Trust

Data extraction connects these domains. Zuboff (2019) conceptualizes surveillance capitalism around the capture and monetization of behavioural data, while Couldry and Mejias (2019) describe data colonialism as a broader appropriation of human life through data relations. Acquisti et al. (2015) show that privacy behaviour is shaped by information asymmetries, cognitive limitations, and contextual factors, challenging assumptions that consent alone resolves data-governance concerns.

3.0 Critical Challenges

3.1 Opacity

Informational asymmetry is one of the defining challenges of platform society. Platforms know substantially more about users, advertisers, workers, sellers, and ecosystem performance than those groups know about platforms. Ranking criteria, advertising auctions, experimentation systems, fraud controls, and enforcement models are often proprietary and continuously changing. This asymmetry weakens the capacity of users to understand why content is visible, workers to understand task allocation, and researchers to evaluate societal effects.

Concentration compounds the problem. Network effects, data advantages, ecosystem lock-in, and control over interfaces can make dominant platforms difficult to challenge. Popiel (2024) shows that emerging platform-governance debates increasingly combine competition concerns with non-competitive harms such as privacy and information integrity. Concentration matters not only because of prices but because a small number of firms can become gateways through which other organizations reach audiences, customers, workers, or software users.

3.2 Asymmetric Power

Algorithmic visibility raises another concern. Recommendation systems can diversify or narrow exposure depending on objectives, training data, and interface design. Helberger et al. (2018) argue that exposure diversity should be treated as a design principle for recommender systems rather than assumed to emerge automatically. Empirical research produces more nuanced evidence than simple claims about "echo chambers": Bakshy et al. (2015) show that both algorithmic ranking and individual choice shape exposure to ideologically diverse news, while Cinelli et al. (2021) identify platform-specific echo-chamber patterns. Platform effects are therefore contingent on architecture and behaviour rather than uniform across services.

Misinformation and moderation intensify tensions between openness, safety, and legitimate governance. Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that false news diffused farther and faster than truth on Twitter in their study, illustrating how platform dynamics can interact with human attention. Yet interventions to reduce harmful information create their own accountability questions regarding error, political pressure, cultural context, and appeals. Moderation at global scale requires judgments across languages and legal systems that cannot be solved purely through universal rules.

3.3 Accountability

Platform labour demonstrates how opacity affects material livelihoods. Workers may depend on ratings, automated deactivation, task allocation, dynamic pricing, and reputation systems that they cannot inspect or meaningfully contest. Rosenblat and Stark (2016) show how information and power asymmetries structure ride-hailing work, and Wood et al. (2019) document both autonomy and intensified control in online gig work. Similar issues arise for sellers, creators, and developers whose visibility or income depends on changing platform policies.

3.4 Cross-Border Governance

Research access is itself a governance problem. Platforms possess the richest data on their own systems while external researchers face API restrictions, privacy constraints, data-access costs, and changing terms of service. This creates a structural imbalance in knowledge production. Independent scrutiny is difficult when platforms can decide which questions are feasible to study, making transparent and privacy-preserving research access a central institutional issue.

4.0 Discussion and Priorities

4.1 Integrative Discussion

Platforms combine technical architecture, market organization, and private governance in ways that make conventional categories difficult to apply. A recommendation algorithm is simultaneously a technical system, a business instrument, and a mechanism of cultural selection. A marketplace fee is both a commercial decision and a rule that shapes who can participate economically. A moderation policy is both a contractual term and an institutional judgment about acceptable public interaction. Analysis must therefore connect algorithms to business models, interfaces, labour arrangements, regulation, and social norms.

The institutional perspective also clarifies why user choice is an incomplete account of platform power. People may technically be free to leave a platform while remaining dependent on it for employment, customers, social networks, software distribution, or public visibility. Infrastructural dependence changes the significance of contractual consent. Plantin et al. (2018) show how platform and infrastructure logics increasingly converge, while van Dijck (2024) argues that governing platform societies requires cross-sector and transnational approaches because platform ecosystems extend across institutional domains.

Business models matter because they create incentives for data collection, engagement optimization, advertising, and ecosystem control. Algorithmic choices cannot be interpreted independently of these incentives. Conversely, regulation can alter technical architecture by requiring interoperability, transparency, data portability, or risk assessment. User behaviour also feeds back into platform systems through clicks, ratings, reports, and content production. Platform governance is therefore recursive: platforms shape users and institutions, while users, markets, and regulation reshape platforms.

Trust should be treated as differentiated and evidence-based. Users may trust a platform to complete transactions while distrusting its privacy practices; workers may rely on a platform economically while contesting its management systems; governments may depend on platform infrastructure while regulating the same firms. Research should avoid reducing these relationships to one general trust score and instead examine specific institutional expectations—fairness, reliability, privacy, transparency, voice, and accountability.

Complementary scholarship informing this synthesis includes Caplan (2020); Gillespie (2020); Gray (2019); Napoli (2019); Srnicek (2017); and van Doorn (2017). These works broaden the evidentiary base considered across the field.

4.2 Research and Practice Priorities

Independent research access is a first priority. Platforms should support privacy-preserving mechanisms through which qualified researchers can study recommendation, advertising, moderation, labour, and market effects without exposing personal data. Access arrangements should be governed by transparent criteria and should not give firms unilateral control over which critical questions can be investigated.

Second, platform transparency should move beyond aggregate transparency reports. Researchers and regulators need information about ranking objectives, significant policy changes, recommender-system design, advertising practices, moderation error, appeals, automated enforcement, and major experiments. Transparency should be structured around questions that external actors can use rather than around disclosure volume.

Third, algorithmic accountability requires methods capable of studying dynamic systems. Audits should combine technical testing with analysis of business incentives, interface design, user adaptation, and institutional effects. Kitchin's (2017) methodological caution remains important: algorithms cannot be understood adequately as isolated code because they operate within evolving socio-technical assemblages.

Fourth, comparative platform studies should examine similar functions across different services, countries, and regulatory environments. Evidence about misinformation, labour, trust, or visibility should not be generalized automatically from one dominant platform. Comparative research can reveal how business models and governance arrangements alter outcomes.

Fifth, longitudinal work is essential because platform policies, interfaces, and user populations change rapidly. Short data windows may mischaracterize long-term dynamics, while major events can temporarily alter behaviour. Researchers should document platform versions, data-collection periods, API conditions, and policy changes that affect reproducibility.

Sixth, data governance and user agency require stronger evidence. Studies should evaluate whether consent mechanisms, portability tools, preference controls, and appeals actually improve users' ability to influence data practices and platform outcomes. Finally, moderation and labour governance should incorporate procedural fairness. Users, creators, sellers, and workers affected by automated or human enforcement need intelligible reasons, correction procedures, and workable appeals. The goal is not to eliminate platform discretion but to make consequential institutional power more accountable.

4.3 Implications for the Journal's Scope

Research on digital platforms should connect theoretical claims about power with empirical evidence about systems, organizations, users, workers, and institutions. Strong contributions may draw on communication, sociology, information systems, governance, development, labour studies, law, media studies, or political economy, provided that arguments remain analytically explicit and empirically grounded.

Particularly valuable work includes independent platform audits, studies of recommendation and moderation, comparative platform governance, data-access methods, platform labour, digital marketplaces, user trust, data portability, advertising systems, and institutional dependence on large platforms. Research from underrepresented geographic settings is especially important because platform practices interact with different languages, labour markets, regulatory regimes, media systems, and development conditions.

The field should also welcome theoretically informed studies that produce null or heterogeneous findings. Platform effects are often presented as universal when evidence is context dependent. Careful empirical research can help distinguish mechanisms that generalize from those that arise from specific products, populations, or regulatory environments. The objective is rigorous analysis of digital intermediaries as institutions, not advocacy for or against particular companies or political positions.

4.4 Conclusion

Digital platforms have become institutional organizers of visibility, communication, commerce, work, culture, and data. Their power cannot be understood solely through market share or technical capability because platforms simultaneously govern participation, structure information flows, define economic terms, and mediate access to other institutions. The resulting relationships are characterized by significant informational asymmetries and by dependence that can persist even when users formally retain a choice among services.

A platform-institution perspective redirects research toward the interaction of algorithms, business models, governance rules, user behaviour, regulation, labour, and social norms. It also clarifies why transparency, privacy, competition, moderation, and trust cannot be studied independently. Interventions in one domain can alter outcomes in another, and identical technical features may have different effects across platform ecosystems.

The most important research task is therefore to make platform power empirically legible. Independent data access, comparative analysis, longitudinal evidence, trustworthy moderation, user agency, labour accountability, and transparent governance are essential to this effort. Digital societies need neither unconditional confidence in platforms nor simplistic assumptions that all platform power is harmful. They need credible evidence about how digital intermediaries exercise institutional power, whose interests their architectures privilege, and which governance arrangements make that power more contestable and accountable.

5.0 Declarations

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Dr. Hannah Whitmore and Dr. Karim El-Sayed contributed to the conceptual development, literature synthesis, critical interpretation, drafting, and revision of the editorial.

5.2 Funding

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5.3 Competing Interests

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5.4 Data Availability

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5.5 AI Use Disclosure

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