GLOBAL PLATFORM COMPANIES AND NATIONAL MEDIA SYSTEMS: NETWORK POWER AND CHALLENGES TO THE ESTABLISHED ORDER

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Introduction
This working paper discusses the relationship between global platform companies and the national media systems, contributing to the on-going discussion of the role and function of platforms in the digital media environment. It should be emphasized, however, that it is still just a *working paper,* not a fully developed argument.

Theoretical point of departure: medie systems and communication systems
Media systems are, in their most basic form, constellations of media institutions, policies, practices, and uses. Media systems are typically rooted in national states[1], where they have developed and institutionalized patterns and practices over the years. That is, today's media systems are very much shaped by the historical, cultural, political, and economical contingencies of the nation state where they exist.

One critique of media systems theory, however, is that it has an empirical bias toward the "old" mass media and focuses mainly on news and journalism. For that reason, new media as well as other types of media (e.g., entertainment) are not really considered by media systems research.

Another challenge to the "old" notion of media systems is the fact that a group of actors has entered the media environment – but are entities that are inherently different from the traditional media in almost every regard. These actors at the global technology companies like Google (/Alphabet), Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Twitter, and the like. These companies operate in a myriad of markets (including commerce, space travel, robotics, etc.), but for this working paper I will focus on is how they engage with the media environment as platforms. Platforms are intermediary digital infrastructures that connect individuals, organizations, and institutions (Srnicek, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018).

One framework for understanding the place of platforms in the media system comes through shifting the theoretical prism. Such a re-orientation is offered by Flensburg and Lai (2020), who suggest focusing on "communication systems" rather than media systems. What they propose is an ontological recalibration that shifts the focus of attention toward structures for communication rather than media institutions. Their argument is that the "old" preoccupation with media institutions clouds the understanding of the interplay between users, providers, and technologies for communication in a society increasingly pervaded by communication technology.

From the perspective of communication systems, media institutions provide one type of communication structure. But although it is an important one, both historically and currently, it is also a most centralized one with

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[1] However, Ravn-Højgaard et al. (2021) argue that the nation should not be the "unit of analysis" for media systems. On the contrary, they argue, media systems also exist on super-national levels (e.g., the European media system) as well as regional or local ones (e.g., the Faroe media system and the Copenhagen media system).

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high barriers of entry, and one where scarcity and editorial decisions prohibits a vast majority of the members of society to participate actively. Platforms, on the other hand, represents an alternative communication structure, which has low barriers of entry because there is no scarcity and no editors[2].

Network power
To understand the way platforms shape the mass media and the media system, a key concept is that of "network power". Proposed by Grewal (2009), network power is the dynamic that certain standards become increasingly important and hegemonic due to "power laws" (Benkler, 2006) or the Matthew effect (Merton, 1968); they are already important, but exactly because they are important, other actors cannot help by orient themselves toward them, which in turn makes them even more important. This way, a centripetal power dynamic is at play.

Such a dynamic exists around the platforms. Because of their size, ubiquity, and reach, the platforms are so central and powerful that they are necessary for other actors to gravitate toward – and that, in turn, makes the platforms even more indispensable for the remaining actors. Facebook is a perfect example of this: as more and more people started to use Facebook through the early 2010s, it became a convenient space for news media to connect users to their content. And as the users then started to use Facebook for accessing news, other news media experienced that they, too, had to start using Facebook to be where the users expected them to be. This way, the "gravitational centers" become ever more central to the network and bend other actors toward them.

The way this network power of the platforms is exercised is through defining the standards that the mass media use. One such standard is the adaptation to "social media logics" (e.g., in the way news media phrase posts on Facebook; Haim et al., 2021), the co-financing and co-production of content (e.g., Netflix, SAM Productions, and the Danish Broadcasting Corporation co-producing the fourth season of "Borgen"), or the "pivot to video" in 2016 (where Facebook prioritized video content on its platform, which made news organizations hire content-creators with video skills *en masse* – only to fire them a few years later upon Facebook's strategic shift away from video again).

All of this takes place in a situation, where the platforms and the media are increasingly competing over advertising revenues and audience data. One way of understanding this situation is as an example of "media capture": the platforms have taken control to such a degree that the media cannot escape them but conform to their standards and the world they have created. And it is not a situation where there is a quick fix for the media. On the contrary,

> "the relationship in this case is characterized by a tension between (1) short-term, operational, often editorially led pursuit of the opportunities offered by both search and social to reach people and (2) more long-term strategic worries about whether the organization will become too dependent on these intermediaries, including worries over whether it will lose control over its editorial identity,

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[2] The algorithms that sort content on the platforms may be considered editorial entities since they "select" some content for highlighting and amplification while other content is hidden. In this connection, it is important to also remember that such algorithms are, in the first place, programmed by humans and, this way, reflect human decisions and biases.

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access to user data, and central parts of its revenue model"
(Nielsen & Ganter, 2018: 1602).

Unequal relations: which game are they playing?

The simultaneously collaborative and competitive relationship between platforms and the media institutions is often describes as a "Mexican stand-off". However, I would argue that card games provide a more suitable metaphor for understanding what goes on between platforms and the media – and why that relationship is a most unbalanced one.

On the one hand, the media institutions metaphorically play a game of contract bridge. They play by an established set of rules that builds upon shifting constellations of collaborations between players, and most of the times they do not know exactly which cards neither opponents nor collaborators hold, even if they can make educated inferences. On the other hand, however, the global platforms companies play poker. And they play the kind of poker we know from cliché cowboy movies, cards up the sleeve and a loaded gun with the safety off ready to shoot at anything that moves.

In this situation, it is hardly surprising that the relationship between platforms and the media is complicated. They do not have the experience of playing by the same rules, and that, naturally, leads to conflict.

And it is an unequal relationship. The media institutions depend upon the platforms to reach audiences, and they are rooted in national contexts and contingencies and, accordingly, subject to regulation. The platforms, however, do not depend upon the media, and as they are global and "new", they largely escape regulation (even if the EU works toward a framework for platform regulation).

Policy responses and fuzzy media systems

To create a more equal relationship, there has been a strong push for regulation of the global platform companies in recent years. This push comes from both the political system and from commercial legacy media, and it comes across the globe (albeit within national political contexts). Proposals for pursuing such regulation have mostly focused on taxation, on increased subsidies to the media (within media systems that have subsidies in the first place), on competition law, and on whether platforms should have "editorial" responsibilities for the content they contain. However, the lack of a political language to talk about the platforms makes it difficult to establish policy frameworks for such regulation.

In the meantime, we see clear implications of the broad roles of the platforms. Most importantly, they now provide critical structures for communication in that they enable more people than ever to participate in a mediated public sphere. It is, however, a public sphere where the dynamics for visibility, amplification, and suppression are opaque, and where the established order of the media and the media system quickly erodes in the process. In most countries, the "old" media institutions find themselves in structural decline, and that have consequences for both the support for independent reporting and for the public sphere in general.

So the media systems become, for the lack of a better word, fuzzy. It is unclear what is inside the system, and what is outside. It is unclear who the competitors are. And it is unclear whom to regulate – and on what grounds to do it. Ultimately, these are political decisions. And they all boil down to a central question: what are the platforms? As long as society and the political system

does not have a clear answer, the rapid reconfiguration of the established order continues.

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