

# Transformations of the public on the Internet

Digital platforms as public spaces and as markets

## Transformaciones de lo público en Internet

Las plataformas digitales como espacios públicos y mercados

## Transformações do público na Internet

Plataformas digitais como espaços públicos e como mercados

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## 1. THE COURSE OF AN INFLUENCE

There is an intellectual mannerism embodied as a habit that, when we try to think about the societies we live in by taking the presence of the Internet as our point of departure, leads us to frame our questions by pointing to the direction of an influence: how has our world changed because of the Internet? Or, put differently, how has the Internet changed us? We can gloss Raymond Williams (1996) and note that this formulation contains two complementary ways of conceiving the relationship between “technology” and “society”: a certain form of technological determinism and a certain form of symptomatic technologism. Technologies thought of as drivers of social change, and technologies thought of as symptoms of changes that precede them and of which they are, to some extent, an outcome. In both cases, “technology” appears as a phenomenon isolated from the “society” it transforms or explains. The very idea of a “relationship” already assumes the existence of two distinct and external phenomena.

This way of thinking must be revisited time and again. Without aiming to offer a theory here, the starting point should be the impossibility of the existence of something like a “society” that is not, in its very constitution, technical and technological (Leroi-Gourhan, 1988; Stiegler, 2002). Before isolating the social—and its contingent expressions: societies; more specifically human societies—from technologies, and particularly from communication technologies, we must stand at that point where the two cannot be distinguished, because they are and become through one another. Then, of course, comes analysis, and analysis requires separation, differentiation, disassembling. One must place, for example, society on one side and the Internet on the other.

Let us return, then, to that intellectual mannerism. The Internet has changed our world, our societies, our lives. Yet it too has become something different from what it once was. That transformation is not merely technological—whether at the level of the infrastructures that make the “cloud” possible; or the apparatus that operates as the material relay of those “virtual” worlds; or the protocols and software that enable the very possibility of making inter-net. That transformation is social, but not because society has changed; rather, because society is made in the Internet, and society itself is made through the Internet.

## 2. WHAT IT WAS, WHAT IT COULD HAVE BEEN: REMNANTS OF THE INTERNET

“Perhaps mass media and mass audiences will prove to be historical anomalies,” wrote Russel Neuman in 1991 (unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the author, 2002), who suspected that those features characteristic of the so-called “mass media” might be seen in the future as “curious vestiges of primitive communication technologies that emerged in the early stages of industrialization.” In Neuman’s favor, it must be said that this conditional prediction did not seek the sensationalism typical of professional sellers of near futures. Instead, there was

(and still is) an unusual lucidity in Neuman's projection, one concerned with the way his present would be perceived and contemplated from the future.

As restless inhabitants of this second decade of the twenty-first century, we already live among other vestiges. Still caught in the frenzy of a new transformation underway—one whose promise or destiny is artificial intelligence (Borisonik & Rocca, 2023)—we stand upon something we still call “the Internet,” but which is already something different from what it might have become in the 1990s and from what it was throughout the first decade of the 2000s. Just over ten years ago, Hito Steyerl (2013) wondered whether the Internet had died and argued that it had at least ceased “to be a possibility” (something new, interesting, a promise of a better future). Taking up Steyerl's concern, Tiziana Terranova (2022, p. 3) wrote that the Internet had become “a residual technology, still an effective element of the present but less legible and intelligible than it used to be.” But as Williams (1977) clearly understood, if a phenomenon is residual, it is not dead. The Internet—this architecture of standards and protocols developed as part of the project of creating a public and open network, cradle of emerging subcultures—is not a corpse, says Terranova (2022, p. 4), but “a zombie, a ghostly presence haunting the Corporate Platform Complex with the specters of its former hopes and possibilities.”

Since we will not attempt to replicate Neuman's visionary gesture, we can at least undertake a brief exercise in retrospect to illustrate how this interplay of hopes, possibilities, and realizations surrounding the Internet has taken shape. In 1993, the U.S. researcher Howard Rheingold (1993) published a book whose title contained one of those terms destined to be consecrated as a formula—that is, as a mechanized way of thinking: *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. By then, Rheingold had spent nearly a decade as an active user of the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL), a Bulletin Board System (BBS) that effectively functioned as a network or virtual community and that remains active today. Remarkably measured in his assessments, Rheingold (1993, p. 4) expressed enthusiasm for the liberating potential of “computer-mediated communications,” though he tried to “keep his eyes open to the pitfalls of mixing technology and human relationships.”

What were those pitfalls? Rheingold says that:

It is always likely that great power and great money will find a way to control access to virtual communities. Great power and great money have always found ways to control new communication media when they have emerged in the past. The Net is still out of control in fundamental ways, but it may not remain so for long. What we know and do now matters, because it is still possible for people around the world to ensure that this new sphere of vital human discourse remains open to the planet's citizens before the big fish of politics and economics seize it, censor it, package it, and sell it back to us. (p. 5)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Translated from: Siempre es probable que el gran poder y el gran dinero encuentren la forma de controlar el acceso

The notion of the virtual community managed, for a time, to capture a salient feature of the social dimension of that early Internet: the phenomenon of groups of people with shared interests and practices who communicated regularly and over a period of time in an organized manner through Internet-based software, using a common place or mechanism. That place or mechanism could be a chat room, a bulletin board system (BBS), or an email program. In their literature review on the consolidation of the term social media, Aichner et al. (2021) show that between 1997— the year when what was perhaps the first social network conceived as such, *Six Degrees*, appeared— and 2002, the notion of the virtual community was the dominant term.

From that point on, the notion of social networks became consolidated (at least in the English-language academic literature). Finally, from 2010 onward, researchers began to predominantly use the term social media. It is no coincidence that this terminological migration coincided with two paradigmatic events: the mass adoption of the smartphone in 2007 and the launch of Instagram in 2009. As Ian Bogost (2022) has aptly summarized, platforms gradually shifted their central function from connection (that is, building or establishing links—strong or weak—with people, organizations, and other entities beyond the reach of our offline experience) to the function of publishing content. Bogost (2022) identifies in this shift a change of epoch: “Social networks turned you, me, and everyone into broadcasters (at least aspirational ones). The results have been disastrous, but also quite pleasurable—not to mention enormously profitable: a catastrophic combination” (n/p).

Almost twenty years after Rheingold glimpsed the capitalist destiny woven into the social uses of the Internet, the researcher José van Dijck (2021, p. 2804) defined the notion of platformization as a historical process equivalent to industrialization or electrification, “a multifaceted transformation of globalized societies.” She added:

The rise of platform ecosystems controlled by corporations and states has turned upside down the once-popular ideal of a universal and neutral Internet that connects the world. To some extent, it has also undermined the classical distinctions between the state, the market, and civil society—concepts that remain vital for delineating governmental arrangements. (Ibid.)<sup>2</sup>

About twenty years ago, the possibilities opened up by the interconnection of increasingly ubiquitous computer networks, together with a series of

a las comunidades virtuales. El gran poder y el gran dinero siempre encontraron formas de controlar los nuevos medios de comunicación cuando surgieron en el pasado. La Red sigue estando fuera de control en aspectos fundamentales, pero puede que no siga así por mucho tiempo. Lo que sabemos y hacemos ahora es importante porque aún es posible que personas de todo el mundo se aseguren de que esta nueva esfera de discurso humano vital permanezca abierta a los ciudadanos del planeta antes de que los peces gordos de la política y la economía se apoderen de ella, la censuren, la metan y nos la vuelvan a vender.

- 2 Translated from: El auge de los ecosistemas de plataformas controlados por empresas y Estados ha puesto patas arriba el otrora ideal popular de una Internet universal y neutral que conecta el mundo. En cierta medida, también ha socavado las distinciones clásicas entre Estado, mercado y sociedad civil, conceptos que siguen siendo vitales para delimitar los acuerdos gubernamentales.

technological developments at the software level, began to shape one of the defining features of the societies we live in today: life on platforms. Gradually—or somewhat surreptitiously—we began to build and manage our social relationships through interconnected devices.

### 3. PARADOXES OF THE MEDIA ECOSYSTEM ON THE INTERNET

Originally conceived as “social networking services”—and therefore as surfaces from which and on which to make-network—the exponential demographic growth and the mass adoption of smartphones opened the door to the era of social media and the economy of the large public, within the very space that had originally been imagined as one of relatively horizontal exchanges, relatively unconstrained, or operating under conditions established by users themselves. Twenty years later, the landscape, though not homogeneous, is qualitatively and quantitatively different: datafication, commodification, consumption and sociality organized by algorithms, an entire economy based on content creation driven by the capture of attention.

We speak of twenty years because round numbers always offer a useful excuse for taking stock. And although the notions of social networks and social media—as well as the applications that embodied those functions—emerged in the second half of the 1990s (Aichner et al., 2021), we can take the creation of Facebook in 2004 as a milestone and use it as a paradigmatic example to reflect on the transformation of platforms and, above all, on how they have shaped the construction of the public sphere as it is lived today.

Over the past two decades, the company created by Mark Zuckerberg and his collaborators has evolved from a site that promoted communication among U.S. college students into a complex platform, establishing itself as the most popular social network in the world. Throughout these twenty years, several theorists have reflected on the transformations that have taken place not only in the context of platforms but in the Internet as a whole. The first decade was characterized by studies on collective intelligence (Lévy, 2003) and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009; Shirky, 2011). Despite their conceptual differences, a group of authors celebrated what, at that time, was taking shape in social networks: their ability to interconnect participants and encompass an emerging culture of collaboration. Many hailed these new possibilities as decentralizing communication processes and as heralding a new horizon for democracy.

However, from around 2010 onward, scholars increasingly felt the need to reflect on the negative horizon that arose from features being incorporated into these networks, mainly due to the influence of capital derived from new business models consolidated through them (Kapoor et al., 2018). As a result, studies shifted toward phenomena such as misinformation, polarization, and hate speech, which revealed the impact of platformization on society (van

Dijk, Poell & de Waal, 2018). The Cambridge Analytica scandal is exemplary in this regard: the revelation of the political uses of Facebook user data signaled the platforms' impact on the shaping of democratic trajectories.

Between the networking function (a latent, inactive system) and the social-media function (a hyperactive system for circulating goods and discourses, with the consequent revitalization of broadcasting), digital platforms increasingly became markets and public spaces. We might say that on platforms we exist as subjects, and among the predominant forms of subjectivity that take shape there, two are especially relevant for this issue of *InMediaciones de la Comunicación*: that of citizens (inhabitants of the city, linked to its communal fate) and that of consumers (inhabitants of the market, sellers, buyers, and commodities at the same time).

Paradoxes of the platform-based media ecosystem: a concentrated and hierarchical political economy in which horizontal construction and sharing are still possible; an ecosystem dominated by corporations in which public goods are nonetheless debated and shaped; a centralized data-collection structure with an apparent capacity for subjective control ("platforms know more about us than we know about ourselves") that is nonetheless full of unforeseen uses.

#### 4. MEDIATIZATIONS AND ECOLOGICAL MUTATIONS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The aim of this issue, devoted to examining the transformations of the public sphere on the Internet, is to reflect on platform life through two guiding ideas: "public space" and "market." If the modern configuration of both phenomena identifies them with heterogeneous aspects of the social (in one case, the exchange of non-commercial symbolic goods aimed at discussing, rationalizing, and disputing political power—or at least those aspects of collective life that concern majorities), the market took shape as that other sphere of social—i.e., collective—action directly associated with the exchange of commodities and the circulation of money. However, the two are interwoven, stitched together by the needle of mediatization.

On the one hand, the task is to study the transformations of the public, that is, of that zone of social life in which institutions and individuals become mutually visible. Since that order is primarily a "by-product of technological arrangements" (Calhoun, 2013, p. 70), the place of media has been and continues to be a central issue. Yet the very development of theoretical and applied reflection shows that the institutional-technological complex of mass media has also been subject to the transformations brought about by new forms of mediatization that, over the last twenty years, have been shaped by the rise of the Internet and, above all, by the expansion of platform life.

What mediatizations have transformed—at least since the eighteenth century—is the structuring of the public or, in other words, the relations between

institutional systems—politics, the market—and their environments. For this reason, we characterize this approach as ecological. At the level of institutional operations—politics, educational systems, economic organizations—mediatization introduces the problem of relations between system and environment. General ecology is precisely the reflection on the system/environment distinction and its transformations.

For general ecology, the task is not to describe environments but to reflect on the relation between systems and their surroundings. The environment is not a fixed reference—not an “environment” in the colloquial sense—but a multifaceted and flexible reference that changes depending on how it is observed and according to the observer’s perspective (Esposito, 2017). The environment “is a problem,” meaning a cognitive challenge and, consequently, a semiotic one. On the one hand, it raises the problem of knowing and observing that beyond which one seeks to access, influence, or intervene in; on the other, it raises the problem of how to resolve, on the surface of the interface, the enactment of discourse, the construction of a communicative scene with that other side.

Saying that the environment is a cognitive problem becomes evident in what Fisher and Mehozay (2019) describe as the shift from a scientific episteme to an algorithmic one—that is, the dominant ways in which media systems “look at,” “observe,” or “know” their audiences. The scientific episteme—characteristic of the age of mass media—was built on social theory, empirical research, and sample design, developing an attributive conception of the individual, who could be assigned to socially and culturally characterized categories. The algorithmic episteme, by contrast, draws on the socio-technical features of Internet-based platforms: (a) the ability to monitor usage data at the individual level; (b) platform interoperability; (c) the use of algorithms as pattern-detection technologies. What results is no longer an audience ordered by socio-demographic categories but a “quantified self,” and the reduction of behavior to the objectification derived from digital traces.

For its part, the communicational problem is always a semiotic one. Whatever occurs behind the mediatic surface of platform interfaces must be resolved, on the surface, through the proposal of some type of link (Cingolani, 2019; Fernández, 2021). Expressed in semiotic terms: if there is contact, there is an interpretant; and if there are interpretants, there is an enunciative challenge—a communicative scene that must be unfolded.

In this context, we might add that the order of the public is an ecology of ecologies (Brighenti, 2010): a complex spanning urban spaces, mediatic surfaces—including Internet-based platforms—state institutional devices, as well as the discursive production, topics of debate, and meanings that circulate across this fabric of urban spaces, mediatic surfaces, and institutional arenas.

We find a phenomenon of doubled ecology: platforms are environments (Scolari, 2015) or ecosystems (Fernández, 2021) within which social life

unfolds, but they also raise the question of how to observe the outside—the re where the social also unfolds. This raises a cognitive and epistemological problem that manifests both at the individual level and at the institutional and organizational levels. On platforms, institutions can observe how socio-individual systems (Verón, 2013) observe society, a fragment of reality, other socio-individual systems, or even themselves—and how they themselves are observed.

This play of crossed observations and constant metonymic shifts between the “inside” and “outside” of online life also applies to the market dimension of the social. When considered in relation to platform society, the notion of “market” refers not only to the image of a platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2018) as a macro-description of an economy based on data extractivism and derivative “knowledge,” but also to a meeting point where imaginaries, fantasies, desires, and needs unfold. It describes a whole sociology on the surface—where we are all already classified, clustered, located in “communities” of tastes, interests, and capacities—but also accounts for a discursive universe whose configuration is deeply semiotic: beyond the “influencer ethos,” the landscape of platforms is saturated with variations of advertising discourse from large, medium, and small companies and entrepreneurs.

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Finally, it is worth noting that being present on platforms has become an imperative for both hairdressers and large media conglomerates. Yet algorithmic logic is implacable: it imposes on each and every one the same false “horizontalism,” where visibility depends on the Russian roulette of increasingly limited organic strategies—making this field practically inaccessible for those who do not possess financial capital.

The texts in this continuous-publication issue of *InMediaciones de la Comunicación* offer targeted immersions into this scenario of complexities. Researchers from various scientific fields proposed responses to the questions raised, through a set of articles that invite reflection on this dual understanding of digital platforms as public spaces and as markets—just as expressed in the title of the call: “TWENTY YEARS LATER. Mediatizations and ecological mutations of the public: digital platforms as markets and as public spaces.”

Our initial proposal as guest editors was not to restrict the contributions to historical balances of the past two decades but to take the “twenty years later” theme as an invitation to reflect from a long-term perspective on the tensions and the ongoing socio-technical mutations within mediatization processes and the ecological transformations of the public. From this provocation emerged theoretical-empirical analyses and essays that combine reflections on the structuring processes of the platform ecosystem over time with emerging



themes—such as artificial intelligence, climate change, and the impact of datification on social exclusion mechanisms.

This perspective is further expanded in the conceptual elaboration of the Corporate Platform Complex (CPC) developed by Italian scholar Tiziana Terranova (2022). One of the notable contributions of this issue is an exclusive interview with Terranova, in which she explains her line of reasoning, linking the CPC to her trajectory as an intellectual and activist in the tradition of Italian post-Marxism. Terranova offers insightful views on platform infrastructures and the emergence of a new version of neoliberalism—the so-called technoliberalism—within which online social relations unfold according to platform logics (Fernández & Dalmolin, 2025). Multiple worlds coexist in the CPC: that of individuals seeking in the Internet a way to organize autonomous work, and that of corporations like Amazon, which subordinate such initiatives to logics of massified and standardized production through platform control. Worlds that allow the articulation of popular movements such as Black Lives Matter, but also foster processes of polarization and political radicalization in racist movements within the plurality encompassed by the term.

In addition to the interview, this issue of *InMediaciones de la Comunicación* offers readers an unpublished translation—in Spanish and Portuguese—of the introduction to *After the Internet. Digital Networks between the Capital and the Common(s)*, Terranova's 2022 book published by Semiotext(e), to whom we are deeply grateful for allowing us to publish the text. There, too, readers will find clues to deepen their understanding of the “After the Internet,” that is, the connectivity infrastructure that has emerged over the past two decades and has, in a sense, inaugurated the new millennium.

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