

Platforms at the Margins

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The globe has become bathed in mobile signals and handsets are a nearly ubiquitous necessity, no longer just a convenience for the prosperous. The resulting benefits of widespread connectivity are many, and the associated enthusiasm about it is deserved. But these gains, and these narratives, also risk obscuring a shift in the political economic action. As we have written elsewhere (Donner 2015), the power of digital technologies to structure social and economic lives increasingly resides not in the handsets, nor even in the towers that connect them, but with the platform companies at the heart of the Internet. The rise of platforms and the pervasiveness of mobile are inextricably linked. As the shift to mobile operating systems, networks, and apps has occurred—surpassing an Internet of PCs, unmetered connections, and open browsers—platform companies have developed and leveraged new points of control. Google runs Android as the window into the Google services within it. Facebook is a “mobile first” company, soaking the attention of nearly two billion monthly users, the majority via mobile interfaces. Apple’s mobile iOS (and the app store platform) touches more people than its PCs ever did. Newer behemoths like the ride-sharing platform Uber are “mobile only” affairs, owing their existence to the particular ways in which smartphones scramble space and time. A more mobile Internet may touch more people. But it seems to do so in a way that depends on (or at least affords) centralization, scale, and standardization (Caribou Digital 2016).

The ways in which these platforms alter the Internet could fill volumes. Our goals in these remarks are twofold. First is simply to signal that dynamics are at play between this age of a platform-driven, more mobile Internet and the prospects for digital inclusion at a global scale. The second is to raise a concern that the decades-old and optimistic frame of ICTs for

development (ICT4D) is increasingly naïve in accounting for the impact of these platforms—while smartphones and apps may have massively democratized the means of production, they have correspondingly intensely focused ownership of the means of distribution.

The 2016 World Development Report was a clarion call here, sensitizing a broad community to how these new digital dynamics altered and complicated what we thought we knew about social and economic development (World Bank 2016). The same unnerving, problematic dynamics debated in the Global North are at play at the margins. Algorithmic culture, “fake” news, the rise of surveillance, and the reorganization of digital labor are worldwide phenomena, partly because those platforms are worldwide.

But this is just the beginning—we suspect that even in the Global South, relationships between individual, state, and market will change more in the next ten years than they have over the past fifty, thanks to a more ubiquitous, more mobile Internet. The changes will be rife with unanticipated and complex consequences. For example, in “digital identity,” the biometric Aadhaar system, and the remarkable India Stack of interrelated services will bring millions of Indians into formal financial and state systems. But this is playing out against the shocks of rapid demonetization and considerable concerns over the erosion of user privacies. These tradeoffs and disruptions, in finance, media, supply chains, even culture, are part of an endless Schumpeterian march of innovation and disruption (Scherer 1986), but at this moment, the disruptions are particularly rapid, and particularly global, with especially challenging prospects for the trajectories of social and economic development.

Consider Facebook. Once it offered social networking to sell advertisements. It still does. But as we write this note in 2017, Facebook has become one of the world’s leading news hosts and aggregators. It is also in the access industry: selling airtime in some countries and discounting “zero-rating” airtime in dozens of others. It offers financial services by facilitating peer-to-peer money transfers via Messenger. It mediates identity on its own terms by promoting a single log-on and a single digital ID, as well as increasingly drawing on artificial intelligence to offer services via chatbots and voice interfaces.

Our challenge to readers, and our enthusiasm for this volume, centers on how traditional ICT4D frames are largely unequipped to address the considerable breadth and depth of the involvement of Facebook, or Uber,

or Mechanical Turk, or any other digital platform in the structure of the economic and social spheres of developing economies. The platforms are not saviors, nor inherently evil; however, they are logics unto themselves. The algorithms birthed in Menlo Park and Mountain View, California, are experienced in Mombasa and Mumbai in ways that may not be optimal for individual users, for regional economies, or even for national sovereignties. Shifts to digital advertising may stifle local news media; shifts in digital opinion may strain domestic politics; shifts in digital identify may alter the relationships between states and citizens; and shifts in digital labor may remove jobs as quickly as it can make them.

Thus, despite all the hope over the last decade for the birth of a Silicon Savannah, it's not enough to put down new offices in the hope of incubating "the next Facebook" in the Global South—we have to understand and ultimately seek to influence how Silicon Valley's platforms are structuring the information age at a global level. There is an urgent need for new circuits of ethical engagement beyond and outside regulation, which is often too late to the party and does little other than retrospectively charge fines after the damage is done. We need to work harder to bring more perspectives of power and exclusion into the broader discourse on technology and development. Critical, engaged scholarship is part of the puzzle, and we see receptivity in industry, policy, and research, but that job is just beginning. Without the kinds of critiques of the global digital platforms found within this volume, we risk standing aside as the digital extractive industries exert power in this century much as the physical extractive industries did in the last one.

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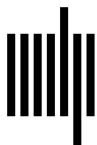
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