

THE FUTURE OF MEDIA

Edited by Joanna Zylinska
with Goldsmiths Media



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6

Our Platformised Future

Clea Bourne

The Logics of Media Work

Well-known media occupations such as journalism, public relations (PR) and advertising have evolved with *professional logics*, which kept them separate yet interconnected. In many regions, journalism was governed by a professional logic of impartiality, PR guarded organisational reputation, while advertising aligned itself closely with creativity and innovation. While these professional logics were subject to exceptions in everyday practice, they bolstered professional identity. Various theoretical lenses have been used to explore interactions between these professions. Notably, tensions between journalism and the promotional professions are often examined through the lens of information subsidies (Gandy 1982; Verčič and Colić 2016). From this perspective, advertising and PR subsidise journalism and editorial processes by supplying paid content (advertising and sponsorship) and earned content (corporate announcements, features, pitched story ideas, images and video).

However, the information subsidies lens generally disguises what journalists and promotional workers have in common. While they may regard each other with suspicion, journalists, PR and advertising professionals are mutually governed by *media logic*. Some now argue that media logic has itself evolved into algorithmic logic (Klinger and Svensson 2018), as journalism, advertising, PR and other media professions now find their expertise increasingly disarticulated and systematically devalued by digital platforms. Indeed, digital platforms are rapidly reorganising all forms of media work. Some traditional media roles have either been hybridised or superseded by newer forms of media expertise such as data trading, content strategy, digital marketing, UI/UX (user interface/experience) design and social media management. These newer media specialisms have come about in response to digital platformisation and accompanying digital

workflows necessitated by data collection, codification and curation (Beer 2019; Ottovordemgentschenfelde 2017).

While the impact of digital platforms and platformisation has been at the forefront of academic and industry debates, there has to date been little attempt to understand the *collective* impact of platformisation on traditional media professions such as journalism, advertising, media production and public relations. This is despite the rise of algorithmic logic superseding any previous media logics governing all these professions (Klinger and Svensson 2018). Contemporary media content now operates more logistically than it does narratively or representationally, as content attracts and organises digital users, places and things across time and space (Andrejevic et al. 2015, 381). A collective approach to platformisation and its accompanying algorithmic logic is crucial because, as I will argue in this chapter, platformisation is now intertwining previously separate media occupations in a way that erases much-cherished professional boundaries.

This chapter will consider the platformised future of media work affecting all media and communication professions, both old and new. First, I will map the contours of digital platforms, before outlining their jurisdictional battle with media publishers – specifically the print and electronic media – where journalists, editors and media producers are employed. Next, I will explore a similar battle between platforms and the global advertising and marketing industries, where advertising, marketing, branding, PR and media buying professionals are employed. I will then shift the discussion to the challenges facing individual media workers and the impact of datafication on their professional aspirations and pursuits.

By exploring the shifting sands of media work the chapter will ask: Where do the professional boundaries lie in the platformised future of media work? And who controls the shifting nature of these boundaries? I will conclude by suggesting that, as traditional media work is being collectively commoditised and devalued by digital platforms, collective rather than separate approaches are needed to secure the future of media work.

Digital Platforms

Digital platforms have emerged as a new means of production in the wider global economy by extracting, circulating and controlling vast amounts of data as an

economic, social and political asset. The metaphorical term ‘platform’ describes an infrastructure which enables two or more groups to interact, combining big data, cloud and mobile telephony together as an increasingly competitive weapon (Gillespie 2010; Srnicek 2017). Digital platforms position themselves as intermediaries bringing together different users, customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers and even physical objects (Srnicek 2017, 43). What they really intermediate is not media content per se, but data flows, by continuously and unrestrainedly measuring audiences, ranking preferences and applying predictive analytics to track, extract, curate, circulate and control vast amounts of data (Beer 2019; Srnicek 2017; Miège 2019).

Platforms now have billions of users around the world, achieving this dominance by providing mostly free content to drive user traffic, rendering platforms more valuable to corporate partners, publishers and advertisers. The USA and China now dominate the world’s digital platforms. Of the world’s ten most valuable brands ranked by *Forbes* magazine in 2020, the top five were platforms – Apple, Google, Microsoft, Amazon and Facebook (Swant 2020). Many of China’s most valuable companies are platforms too, including search engine Baidu, Tencent (owner of WeChat and QQ), the Alibaba group (owner of Alibaba, Alipay and Taobao) and up-and-comer ByteDance (owner of TikTok).

While there are many ways to categorise digital platforms, media workers are most likely to interact with these platforms via four categories (Watts 2020). The first category is social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and WeChat. The second is knowledge-sharing platforms for team working, file sharing and data management, such as Slack or Monday.com. The third category is media sharing platforms, such as YouTube, Spotify and TikTok. Finally, there are service-oriented platforms like Amazon, Uber and Airbnb. Many digital platforms engage in aggressive digital marketing and media practices to support their brand visibility and competitive positioning. As a consequence, while social media platforms have sociality baked into their funding model, other kinds of platforms now incorporate ‘social’ qualities too.

Because data is *the* raw material produced by digital platforms, just like any traditional industry, these digital platforms require more raw material in order to expand (Manokha 2018). This is why the *modus operandi* of all digital platforms is continuous information gathering on ever more users and objects, via ever more platform activities, so as to generate ever more data. As Dave Beer (2019, 1) argues, the salient question then becomes ‘who has the power to speak with that data?’ Crucial to answering this question, says Beer, ‘is an understanding of the new

types of knowledge that are emerging along with an understanding of how that knowledge achieves authority, credibility and legitimacy'. Beer's work explores the field of data science as a rapidly expanding professional project focused on providing data insights. As Beer points out, it is not the data collected by digital platforms that is itself powerful but the resulting data insights through which 'hidden' value can be unearthed for organisational agendas – whether commercial, political or societal. As an emerging profession, data science has asserted its data power while simultaneously encroaching on several areas of digital media and marketing expertise, by producing the insights needed to understand what drives customers and audiences. The focus of this chapter is to apprehend *which* media professions most closely approximate the data power now enjoyed by the emerging data science profession.

While Beer focuses on the professional legitimacy acquired through data insight, Leicht (2016) contends that the professions of the future are the ones most associated with interpreting, making or creating markets. To this end, it already seems clear that the successful media professions of the future are the ones best able to create and interpret platformised markets by determining, designing and constructing strategies for capturing and sequestering data, and converting this data into various forms of value (Ruckenstein and Granroth 2020; Fourcade and Healy 2017; Nadler and McGuigan 2018). However, future media workers cannot all be strategists; the vast majority are likely to be tacticians, involved in daily data-driven tasks that may look like traditional media work, but that will exist only to support a larger 'data gaze' (Beer 2019).

Platforms versus Publishers

The future of media work will also be shaped by battles now waging between old and new media power. The first of these battles pits digital platforms against traditional media publishers. Media publishers include many well-known brands – broadcasters such as the BBC and ITV, news media such as *The Sunday Times*, *The Economist* and the *Daily Mail*, and multimedia publishers such as Bauer Media, which owns a stable of periodical publications such as *Grazia*, *Empire*, *Heat* and *Closer* magazines, as well as its radio stations Kiss FM, Magic FM, Absolute Radio and others.

These media publishers historically derived much of their power, profitability and significance from controlling old media technologies and channels (Nielsen

and Ganter 2018). However, the digital platform business model disarticulates publishers' power by matching producers and consumers of news, information and entertainment, and closing the gap between them, offering cheap, targeted online advertising to producers in turn for large volumes of mostly free, shareable media content delivered to consumers.

Digital platforms have always pitched their role to traditional media publishers as a collaborative one, in which platforms and publishers co-create value (boyd 2014; Jenkins et al. 2013). Over time, platforms have disarticulated processes which allowed media publishers to retain any leverage in their platform enterprise. For instance, several platforms now require media publishers to co-produce content using the platform's specialised, proprietary editorial tools (Rein and Venturini 2018). These tools, initially pitched as a way to drive traffic and referrals to publishers, increasingly allowed people to access news and feature stories within the platform rather than going to the publisher's website or app (Nielsen and Ganter 2018). The effect is a 'walled garden' in which the platform captures the users' data, which can then be monetised (Rein and Venturini 2018).

This leaves media publishers to act as little more than traffic drivers, shunting content towards platforms to generate advertising revenue (Rein and Venturini 2018). The largest media publishers can invest seriously in driving traffic. Platforms subvert publishers' efforts to dominate user traffic by regularly tweaking platform algorithms to control what media content is seen where. To combat this, publishers need in-house data teams constantly tracking and analysing a platform's algorithms. *Financial Times*, for example, has a large team focused on analytics and engagement; the audience engagement team sits in the newsroom, working directly with journalists (Southern 2016). Smaller media publishers are less well-resourced than *Financial Times*, and simultaneously more reliant on digital platforms. A change to a platform's algorithm can send a smaller publisher's content plummeting down a platform's viewer ranking, a practice that has already spelled the death of smaller publishers' operations.

Meanwhile, Google now owns a piece of every part of the media ecosystem: ad-serving systems, television-targeting capabilities as well as its own news products (Wodinsky 2020). Google will reportedly take an even bigger cut from stories that might show up in Google's search engine, with only 51% going back to the publisher in question (Wodinsky 2020). Studies of value co-creation on digital platforms now clearly indicate that all co-created value on digital platforms is more beneficial to platform owners than it is to any of the companies accessing platform services (Haile and Altmann 2016). Regulation could address

this imbalance. In 2021, Australia introduced a new media code designed to force platforms to pay for news and bargain with news publishers. Google complied, but Facebook responded by briefly banning Australian news from its platform, before reaching a deal with the Australian government. Some commentators believe that if the Australian government had ‘held its nerve’ it would have created the first opening for rival social media companies in the Australian market for almost two decades (Meagher 2021).

Platforms versus Adland

Media publishers are not the only major players whose expertise has been disarticulated by digital platforms. The same has happened to global advertising and marketing empires. Digital platforms, in closing the gap between production and consumption, have squeezed the very space traditionally controlled by advertising, marketing and PR. Facebook, Google and other digital platforms have systematically targeted every kind of advertiser, from global brands to small-to-medium-sized businesses to self-employed influencers, offering access to (potentially) billions of users via packaged advertising services. Facebook and Google have quickly become the largest advertising companies in the world, accounting for nearly 70% of digital advertising spend in the UK (Goetzen 2020). Facebook has further broadened the scope of its advertising activities into marketing as well, hailing its Marketing API (MAPI) as a platform for marketing research and development, and related services (Helmond et al. 2019).

Even those promotional media roles which owe their existence to digital platforms, such as programmatic advertisers that buy and sell digital advertising content and space, face an uncertain future as digital platforms protect their walled gardens. Programmatic advertising specialists use technologies and logics to personalise price, information, news and entertainment. These technologies, including the banner ad, the interactive link and the cookie, defined an entire decade of online advertising (Turow and Draper 2012). Cookie-matching enabled advertisers to buy the right to reach a consumer whom other companies had previously tracked around the web (Turow and Draper 2012).

Digital platforms established structural norms of working with advertisers and marketers just as they had with media publishers and, just as with media publishers, platforms then changed the terms and conditions. In 2020, Google announced it would stop using third-party cookies, the pieces of code that track

what a user or their device does across different websites, helping companies figure out when to serve an ad. Other platforms have followed suit, throwing programmatic advertising professionals into disarray. The demise of the third-party cookie further cements power asymmetries between platforms and the advertising industry, since platforms continue to collect masses of first-party data within their walled gardens. Brand owners and advertising agencies with enough resources have responded by investing in cloud-based data management stacks to consolidate their own first-party data with other data sources (Vaccaro et al. 2019, 90).

Equally, brands and promotional agencies with the deepest pockets are best able to respond to other realities of a media market ruled by digital platforms. WPP, the world's largest advertising company, is in a position to buy expertise needed to boost its data power. In 2021, the advertising giant bought DTI Digital, a Brazilian software engineering company, to boost its expertise in data collection, app development and e-commerce (WPP 2021). Other large firms are exploring how to accelerate their flow of digital content. Edelman, the world's largest independent PR firm, has launched a production house to focus on data-driven content. Edelman's international network of studios and production operations is the latest in a series of moves by the PR titan to compete with advertising giants for digital content spend (Marszalek 2021). Large advertising, marketing and PR departments and agencies can also afford to experiment with new algorithmic logics. For instance, the Clubhouse audio app, which launched in 2020, expanded the algorithmic logic of platforms by boosting the popularity of live conversation during the Covid pandemic. Clubhouse was ad-free at launch, yet brands such as Pernod Ricard were able to establish visibility with Clubhouse users by staging a week of sponsored conversations with social media influencers during US Black History Month (McCoy and Joseph 2021). While large companies can invest to compete, the digital divide has become a real issue for smaller brands and promotional agencies, as it has for individual media professionals, whom I discuss in the next section.

Implications for Media Workers

Having briefly explored the battles waging between digital platforms and various media stakeholders, I now reflect on the future of media work, where an individual's labour is primarily, even solely, defined as the production of

value through data. There is no question that future media and communications professionals need practical skills to navigate digital platforms and their persuasion architecture. What remains unclear at the time of writing is which set of media and communications specialisms will acquire greater professional status, and which fields of expertise will come to dominate our popular understanding of 'media work'. The race is now on to determine which media professions will be indispensable to their client organisations as media work becomes further integrated into data-driven culture.

Where once we understood media work by its traditional media channels (broadcast versus print) or by the nature of media output (paid advertising content versus earned PR content), the future of media work may be bifurcated by upstream versus downstream activities within data flows (Dimitrov 2018). Upstream, we find media professions that control the *wholesaling of data strategy and insight*. This group now incorporates data scientists, who design and test experiments using statistics, calculus and linear algebra; data analysts, who implement strategy around data; audience strategists, tasked with protecting and growing value of collective audiences; and digital knowledge managers, who control data integrity for the organisation, its brands, products, people, locations and services (Baer 2017; Liffreing 2018). Some of these data-driven media roles will become more recognisable and permanent, while others will merge into parallel upstream responsibilities in data strategy and management.

Recasting Content Creation

Downstream, meanwhile, is the large cluster of traditional media professionals involved in *retailing digital content* (Dimitrov 2018), notably journalists, media relations practitioners, copywriters, film and video producers, photographers and advertising creatives. The declining status of traditional media work taking place 'downstream' of data flows is a matter of some concern. Downstream, media activity is collectively described as 'content creation'. This catch-all phrase incorporates expert activity by professionals who spent many years perfecting their skills in news and feature writing, investigative coverage, film and video production, magazine publishing, speechwriting, copywriting, blogging, vlogging, photography, graphic design and animation.

Nevertheless, in a platformised media world, 'content', no matter how complex, painstakingly conceived, richly textured or aesthetically beautiful,

becomes simply a digital object combining creative content with metadata. Metadata consists of hidden, descriptive material generated behind the scenes to tag content as it traverses digital spaces. This original metadata then combines with accumulated metadata from likes, comments and reactions generated by platform users (Dushay 2002). Inevitably, occupational shorthand has taken over; media workers' content is no longer approached as content but simply as metadata (Andrejevic et al. 2015). Ultimately, media content itself becomes commoditised and devalued, because the real value lies in the metadata and the experience it delivers as the digital content 'comes alive' on a digital platform through sharing and manipulation (Dushay 2002). This experiential 'liveness' attached to media content is what generates advertising revenues and captures additional consumer data for future predictive customer profiling, analysis and data strategy (Bilton 2019).

Media workers not only face deskilling of their content creation in favour of metadata; they must also contend with platformised approaches to professional storytelling. Digital platforms require a relentless flow of malleable 'spreadable' content (Jenkins et al. 2013). Journalists, advertising and PR professionals alike have found their storytelling skills have now shifted from professional expertise to that of co-created projects with non-specialists and amateurs. The media professional is instead encouraged to become the story owner, building a 'story system' outward through co-creation with third-party media partners, as well as consumers who must be lured into adapting or responding to the original content, at minimal cost to the digital platform (Bilton 2019; Lowengard 2019).

It is now apparent to many traditional media workers that the skills they once honed in producing media content to inform, educate or entertain no longer hold the same professional status. Media and advertising bosses (and their shareholders) have all grown more focused on the traffic generated by media content than on any long-term informational, societal or aesthetic value that content might reap. Furthermore, media professionals increasingly compete with everyday citizens who are platform users, and who, through sheer numbers, can produce far more content, much more quickly, than most media professionals – who must follow normative rules and organisational guidelines.

I end this chapter by returning to the assertion made at the start: that interprofessional tensions and struggles have largely shaped our understanding of the relationship between various media professionals operating on different sides of an old-world media divide. Today there is a new media divide in which digital platforms dictate the lives and prospects of all professional media stakeholders.

The direction of travel suggests that the future of media work may be best secured through recognising shared interests among all media workers whose professional efforts may be designed and packaged to ‘sell’, but who ultimately play an important role in how we inform and develop society and the human condition.

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