

# Marc Steinberg, *The Platform Economy: How Japan Transformed the Consumer Internet*

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

## KEITH B. WAGNER

We cannot deny the rise and impact of digital platforms in our media ecosystem today. They are ubiquitous new components of contactless physical interaction on the internet from Alibaba to Amazon and these digital platforms act as facilitators of exchange between users/consumers and the companies that bring services and products into what Benjamin H. Bratton calls “temporary higher-order aggregations” (2015, 41). Like an ethereal architecture suspended weightlessly above us in the sky—markedly different from the hardware of satellites and their own “cultures in orbit” (Parks 2005)—digital platforms are still reliant on this very technology as well as Cloud, fibre-optic cables and 4G and 5G telecommunications. But, it must be said, that digital platforms also manage vast arrays of content rather than simply transmit such content to users; satellites act as their own hardware platforms high up in the atmosphere vital to global communication. Platforms thus rely on deliverability by sending data through homepages and various Apps through our mobile phones, all of which allow *real* goods to materialize on our doorsteps or bring us packets of data and virtual content.

But are digital platforms marked by their media industries’ own national stripes? What of their histories in a

particular domestic market? Do they serve those publics alone? Sometimes. Yet, sometimes they are more interdependently stitched into our media globalization matrix than previously thought. Sometimes, even, the importance of certain industries have been overlooked in English-language scholarship by media studies scholars. Marc Steinberg’s *The Platform Economy: How Japan Transformed the Consumer Internet* (2019) answers many of these questions and makes bold new claims about the emergent forms of production and monetization of content through digital platforms in Japan since the 1990s. Platforms, scrupulously defined in this new book as their own free-standing system and “walled gardens” follows a percipient argument that these digital enclosures should be interpreted as objects and organizational forms. He argues for this at both a granular and telegraphic level, in order to show how this media’s presence is felt and consumed. Zooming back out and away from East Asia, Steinberg also shows that Japanese platforms have been included in a worldwide “media process geographies” (Lamarre 2015, 13), including the hegemonic United States and its F.A.A.N.G. (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google) oligopoly, where programmable deliverable services and creative content-produc-

tion is contingent on the global prevention of the “free flow of digital files” under neoliberal globalization. To its credit, the book sees platforms not as isolated forms of capitalist production but increasingly part of a single world system. Platforms “enrol users through a participatory economic culture and mobilise code and data analytics to compose immanent infrastructures” (Langley and Leyshon 2016, 1). Indeed, platforms are imbued with their own highly localized elements as much as their rollout parallels other regional changes to internet practices and services. In other words, global platformization is thought-through Japan and related to domestic, East Asian and international usages of how content and services are conceived at various scales.

Steinberg analyzes the use of platforms as they became a means to transform the Japanese economy, a sector of continued growth in the shadow of the country’s “Lost Decade” (1991–2001) and its recessionary slumps in 2008 and 2014. His syncretic methodology is remarkably balanced, examining platforms “from historical, geographical, cultural, institutional, and corporate perspectives,” a move which provides “an account of [their] discursive development and practical uses” (2). The latter discipline of management theory, rarely brought into dialogue in media and cultural studies scholarship is refreshing, with the research here distilled from McKinsey & Company reports to corporate memos and primary sourced conversations transcribed from talks and press conferences held by industry innovators and CEOs, all of which show the business side of thinking about software

and value chains.

The book also continues what could be called “new configurations of media institutions,” postulated earlier by Steinberg in his *Media Theory in Japan* with claims that Japanese media needs its own history and theory tool kit, which the anthology rigorously outlines, but also elegantly responds to in terms of challenging the “fixation on the United States alone as the site of platform production and platform politics.” (2019, 214) Such an intervention takes shape in Chapter 1, dubbed a prelude to platforms and takes aim at content discourse in Japan, linked, too infrequently, to marketing strategies. Here the contention is framed by content, and that it “rides on existing media and discursive formations, even as it transforms them.” (52) *Kontentsu*, explained by Steinberg as the Japanese derivation of media, presupposes that the term becomes a catch-all in that it designates “anime, manga, light novels, games, and other forms of Japanese subcultural media” (51). Such linguistic differentiation is vital to understand how platforms’ transformative effects have made parts of the internet highly profitable in Japan, particularly online shopping via mobile phones.

Simultaneously, as the book builds its elegant argument a more dominant pulse emerges: a case study of Docomo’s i-mode. The key case study is given forensic detail in Chapter 4. As a “king of content,” Docomo’s i-mode was one of the first platforms in Japan during the 1990s and early 2000s to almost single-handedly create an ecosystem for online shopping on mobile phones and was a “precursor to Apple’s App Store and Google’s Google Play” (147). This bold and original insight

about Docomo's i-mode's precursor status is flawlessly explicated, the argument is marshalled through earlier "stacked" conceptual and theoretical chapters regarding platformization as a process and connection where transactions are facilitated between people, capital and commodities. Platforms and the companies which create them also obfuscate the deadening nature of the work involved in sustaining this industry: coding, online/virtual assistance, to logistical planning in real time. The severity of overwork, burn-out, and suicide mark various sacrificial actions by cognitariats, victims to progress and growth, something that needs urgent critical reflection to determine how the Fourth Industrial Revolution is exploitative to workers in both the internet and telecommunication industries. In order to hold the conservative government in Japan accountable, the abuse of high-tech labour must form part of a complete "corporate narrative" if we are to understand the huge amount of cognitive toil exerted to maintain the operational capacity and financial profitability of these industries. And they are immensely profitable these days. But Steinberg sidesteps Japanese neoliberalism's commodification of content and workers to instead put a benign spin on platform capitalism, dislodging it from the forces of labour needed to make platformization a thing, a new capitalization of digital economic circulation. The collusion of free market principles and the hardware and software that allow this new phase of capitalism to flourish could have been acknowledged in a footnote, all to explicate the dehumanizing effects that administrative level maintenance is

having on ordinary professionals and how media continues to fit into the infrastructural coordinates of neoliberal globalization.

Admittedly, in Steinberg's defence, there is exhaustion with neoliberal capitalism as concept and real economic policy, even if all of its varied forms have yet to be theorized. Academia is now transfixed with digital platforms and platform capitalism. And Steinberg's many points are still salient despite the slippage in charting this transition or refinement of late neoliberalism to what I might call platform neoliberalism. That Docomo's i-mode came to "create a new mode of mediation between multiple partners, pioneering the emergence of the mobile internet as a fee-driven platform," (159) helps to develop the overall indispensable and crucial view of media globalization's new shift. But this is not merely an apologia for a less critical media studies approach deployed by Steinberg either, my own labour studies views aside; rather this book shows, brilliantly, how Japan and its platform economy turned mobile phones into emporiums of goods, linking up new technologies as conditional to the country's internet development. While few have interrogated this booming market's precarization of key workers, its programmers and software engineers and their centrality to smooth-running internet services in Japan, a much-needed Marxian viewpoint can be left to others, as Steinberg's keen understanding of the convergence among markets, internet companies and the finance industry is brilliant in its unpeeling of these layers. But Marxist analysis isn't completely absent here either, as we get

autonomist theory à la Lazzarato to illuminate another component in the cultural logic of mobile phones: that is, that this fetish object outperforms its initial value or function as a communicative tool. Mobile phones are now indispensable interfaces to all sorts of economic opportunities through digital platforms.

To rewind to Chapter 2, “Platform Typology,” Steinberg further explicates the platform as a rejection of hardware-centric uses, drawn from Gillespie’s (2010) focus on YouTube and its corporate positioning as a content hub and not a media conglomerate. Expansion of Negoro Tatsuyuki and Ajiro Satoshi’s three-pronged typology was also smartly cited and elucidated. Steinberg unpacks how “product-technology platforms,” “contents platforms,” and “transactional or mediation platforms” define the practices of platformization writ large. Such a distinction is illuminating, shedding light on objective and technological uses of platforms drawn from primary and secondary sources in both Japanese and English.

The book also teaches us that cultural regionalization in Asia has its place in the process of platformization, with impressive considerations of South Korea’s KakaoTalk and China’s WeChat in his concluding chapter, a balancing of Japan and earlier discussions of globalizing platforms with confidence and fresh insights. Priming these two digital platforms moves us out of the heady theory work Steinberg provides and gives readers more graspable examples of social media that would not be possible without Japan’s innovative development of platform technology. As rival nations,

Korea and China are determined to wrestle away inter-Asia supremacy from Japan, a task they have already accomplished, yet also an onerous pathway as corporate profit continues to shape our global media system. But if profit is to be had, one must rely on knowing one’s history and knowing the history of internet services in Asia, specifically as it applies to Japan. If Japan can claim to be a pioneer in this area—they are and continue to be—and even if attention has been diverted from their current platform culture, Steinberg reminds us that revisiting this history is necessary and until this study, often only known to those who live in Japan or who have read the literature in Japanese.

*The Platform Economy*, undoubtedly, will become essential reading as the discourses that pertain to platform capitalism grow and area-specific studies are needed to bolster and concretize platformization as process, and platform as digital object. It connotes a parallel history to the late-twentieth century’s hype over globalization, where platforms connect to telecommunication interconnectivity, yet to Steinberg, platforms are also distinct as a meta-concept and real e-commerce domain, conceived as technical objects and business practices. Given our current “platform turn” found in media studies, this book’s rich case studies of platforms from a local-to-regional-to-global perspective reveals not only the ethereality of the term itself but also a detailed cultural history and genesis of the concept emerging out of Japan. One finds the theory to be exciting and erudite and pursued with glorious results. Steinberg not only expands the history of the platform

economy, he envisages its multidimensionality under surveillance capitalism or late neoliberalism, but he does so with charm, intellectual acuity, and purpose. Most strikingly, perhaps, is Steinberg's contention that Japan continues to recentre media globalization, where content's global transformation of the way we shop online points to Japan and its Docomo's i-mode offshoots globally. Transposed from Japan, Docomo's i-mode became the dominant business model, one platform operators such as Google and Netflix and Deliveroo followed and what consumers' see as high-tech infrastructure turning us into a platform society.

### References

- Bratton, Benjamin H. 2015. *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.
- Lamarre, Thomas. 2015. "Regional TV: Affective Media Geographies." *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 2, nos. 1–2: 93–126.
- Langley, Paul and Andrew Leyshon. 2016. "Platform capitalism: The intermediation and capitalisation of digital economic circulation." *Finance and Society* 3, no.1: 11–31.
- Parks, Lisa. 2005. *Cultures in Orbit: Satellites and The Televisual*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Steinberg, Marc. 2019. *The Platform Economy: How Japan Transformed the Consumer Internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Van Dijck, Jose, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal. 2018. *The Platform Society* Oxford: Oxford University Press.