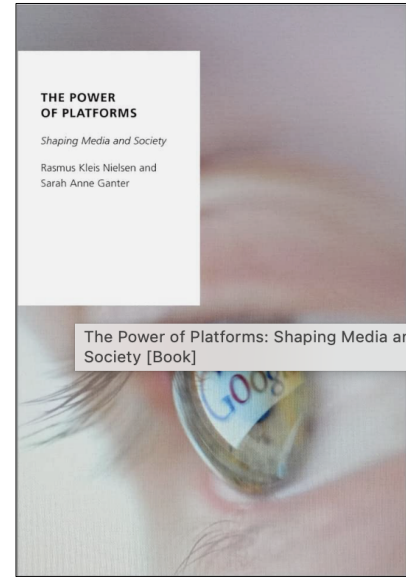


Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Sarah Anne Ganter, **The Power of Platforms: Shaping Media and Society**, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022, 272 pp., \$20.14 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Gayoung Jeon
University of Texas at Austin

The Power of Platforms: Shaping Media and Society provides a critical look at how large technology companies like Google, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram came to dominate media environments, as well as the impact of platforms on journalism. How and where people get news has radically changed over the last decade, with most Americans now getting their news from search engines, social networking sites, and news apps (Forman-Katz & Matsa, 2022). Still, most people have only a cursory understanding of how the rise of platforms has affected journalism and digital media environments. The authors, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Sarah Anne Ganter, offer an in-depth qualitative study of how platforms have transformed the way media, news publishers, industries, and individuals interact. As the primary focus of the discussion, the authors elaborate extensively on how behavioral targeting by IT companies can be used to shift readers away from newspapers and toward digital media. The findings not only help researchers address key issues arising from the scale and speed of digitized and platformed news consumption, but the book will also be a valuable guide for digital citizens when making daily information choices.



Nielsen and Ganter are communication scholars who previously worked together at the University of Oxford's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. This book is a report on their long-term research, which started in 2010 to analyze changing relationships between platforms and publishers. They based their analysis on data they gained through formal interviews and conversations with staff members from Google, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as international news publishers in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

From the outset, the authors clearly distinguished between news media and platforms; the former creates and publishes content, whereas the latter distributes existing content through networks. They also explain platforms as private, for-profit sites and news media to serve the public interest, at least in part. The authors see that the differences between the two parties made it possible for them to establish a relationship of mutual interest where news publishers have access to audiences while platforms have the content. Still, this interdependence becomes asymmetrical as newsrooms become more entangled with and dependent on platforms over time.

The book indicates that platforms have surpassed newspapers due to their advertising technologies based on algorithm-driven software. Nielsen and Ganter defined platform power as relational and

generative. They see the power as relational, as it depends on a large number of platform users and their available behavioral data. The unprecedented size network that platforms created with users has become a frictionless path for information to flow. Additionally, the aggregated digital footprints enabled platforms to provide target audiences with content tailored to their tastes based on their habits and preferences.

Furthermore, the authors see the platform's power as generative in that it encourages new actions from publishers who service content with them. Google, for example, created the advertising software AdWords, AdSense, and Double Click to provide each user with different advertisements based on individual data gathered on their behavior and preferences. It made Google more appealing to advertisers than other competitors, including newspapers, as it can connect advertisers to unduplicated, niche individuals. In other words, advertisers are no longer required to invest in legacy media. Consequently, it pushes news publishers to explore platforms where they can find two types of customers: advertisers who pay with money and audiences who pay with attention.

They emphasize that platforms and news media wield power contingent on people choosing to interact with them. Their points not only clarify the origins of the power but also outline practical suggestions for news organizations to consider to serve the public, highlighting which would ultimately be the way to maximize their interests. The authors also provide an in-depth account of how the platform's profit-driven policies and operations led to the reconstruction of a media ecology with a great cause of serving "end users" the best rather than the public. It bolstered their point for why we should be cautious of defining platforms as public social infrastructures: "Platforms create effectively privately owned digital spaces with a para-public character" (p. 9).

More importantly, the book illustrates how powerless publishers are to platform regulations and structures that limit access to user data and uphold the secrecy of their software logic and algorithms. Indeed, publishers are at risk due to the "black box" rules of platforms (p. 102); algorithm updates have a significant financial impact on thousands of publishers who use platforms to distribute their content. Because of this, the authors caution newsrooms against relying on platforms, encouraging referrals and off-site publishing to get instant traffic and advertising incentives, concerned that press media might become "slaves to the algorithm" (p. 26).

Lastly, Nielsen and Ganter criticize platform powers and journalistic responses more directly. They contend that while it is undeniable that platforms have grown in importance in the digital news media landscape, this will not be consistent over time. They offer new approaches for news publishers to enhance the positive function of platforms that expand opportunities for diverse and broad individual citizens' voices to be heard while reducing platform monopolies, using cases from several European and Asian countries. They finally emphasize publishers' collaborative efforts to secure the licensing of their content on social media and urge publishers to develop new, independent strategies such as increasing content quality and forming new distribution channels.

The book effectively describes platforms' various social influence levels as they rose to positions of commanding power in the media ecology. Still, the book is not without limitations. First, it makes no room for discussing the influence of platforms on individual citizens, such as whether the platform hampered the public's

ability to be well-informed or whether the algorithms aided the public in receiving important news more efficiently or effectively. Also, they have not looked into the platform's impact on individual journalists or the quality of news. Still, to fully understand the ramifications of new technology and the evolving media landscape on journalism, one must consider how these shifts impact journalistic practice, especially its role in the democratic process—providing the public with timely, quality information. Concentrating on the competitive dynamics within the media market with less emphasis on its effects on public communication, complementing it with studies addressing these broader implications, the book enriches the discourse. Thus, integrating this book with complementary studies like van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal's (2018) *The Platform Society* and Diakopoulos's (2019) *Automating the News* offers a more comprehensive understanding of the present challenges and opportunities in journalism within the context of a digital, platform-mediated media environment.

Despite these limitations, this book, based on interviews and in-depth reflection on the societal context of emergent technology, has contributed greatly to current understandings of issues with platformed news consumption. The book's detailed explanation of how platforms gained power over newsrooms from humans—specifically, users in large scale—prevented platform power from being idealized as the supreme ruler or a terrifying monster of the current media system. Rather, it demonstrates what journalists in digital media should focus on: public needs and keeping up with societal change, rather than sticking to their old ways. In this light, this book will be a useful addition to the current field of digital media studies that focuses on quantifiable data to critically examine the decreased credibility and readership of journalism institutions.

References

- Diakopoulos, N. (2019). *Automating the news: How algorithms are rewriting the media*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Forman-Katz, N., & Matsa, K. E. (2022, September 20). *News platform fact sheet*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/>
- van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.