

Julian Sefton-Green, Kate Mannell, and Ola Erstad (Eds.), **The Platformization of the Family: Towards a Research Agenda**, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025, 113 pp., \$59.99 (hardcover), \$39.99 (paperback); open access.¹

Reviewed by
Leah Cates
Rutgers University

The Platformization of the Family: Towards a Research Agenda provides a much-needed organizational structure, theoretical framework, and scholarly agenda for the bevy of literature that has, over the past quarter century, interrogated how families engage with platforms: the digital structures that mediate interactions between social actors. Platforms function, the authors write, as technological, governmental, and economic entities that monopolize major markets by extracting human data en masse, thereby redefining standards for human safety and privacy. Platforms both configure and are configured by the family: a nebulous, dynamic construct of which the authors do not seek to impose a definition. Instead, the authors observe how people self-define and create family—in other words, how individuals “do family” (p. 15).



Characterized by its authors as “more collaborative than a typical edited book” (p. v), the text unites established scholars of children and media, including editors Julian Sefton-Green and Ola Erstad, with emerging academics in the field, including editor Kate Mannell. Alongside the three editors, the book’s eight contributors workshoped one another’s chapters, collectively shaping key arguments. The scholars originally met in 2023 in Oslo, Norway, for a brief seminar on the relationship between digital platforms, families, and children. Their conversations transformed into the foundations of a book project to conceptualize a phenomenon that countless pieces of scholarship interrogate but few explicitly name: the platformization of the family.

Stretching just past 100 pages, *The Platformization of the Family* is, it seems, intentionally short: The open-access book functions as a “provocation” to understand how families and platforms interact and respond to their mutual engagements, as well as a “primer” on methodologies and frameworks for doing so (p. 18). It grounds and contextualizes decades of research on platforms and families and simultaneously guides future scholarship. While the platformization of the family is a worldwide phenomenon, the authors write, they situate their work in the Global North, drawing on studies in which participants come from Australia, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Geographic homogeneity is a limitation of the book, but scholars of other regions can draw on and shape the

¹ <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-74881-3>

theoretically rigorous, yet accessible, guide this text offers. It is essential reading for scholars of platforms, media, family, childhood, and/or STS (science, technology, and society), from which the interdisciplinary book frequently draws.

The Platformization of the Family is neatly organized into six discrete, yet interrelated, sections. In the introduction (which doubles as chapter 1) and chapter 2, the editors, alongside esteemed scholar of children and media Sonia Livingstone, situate families' engagement with platforms in the lineage of scholarship interrogating the reciprocal relationship between human culture and technology (for example, Corner, 1995). The authors advocate an approach to human-platform interaction that is neither overly optimistic nor fatalistic about the latter's effect on the former. Nuancing scholarship that suggests platforms exploit domestic spaces, or even "colonize" them (Goulden, 2019), the authors propose that families and platforms mutually shape one another.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore two key areas of scholarship on the platformization of the family: how platforms reshape, extend, and are reconfigured by family life within and beyond the home (chapter 3), and how the datafication imposed by platforms affects and is informed by the normative expectations and lived experiences of parents raising babies (chapter 4). Chapter 5 identifies methodological challenges with and approaches to studying the platformization of the family. The book editors write the conclusion, in which they identify key features of platformization and family and propose a theoretical approach to the platformization of the family: extended-domestication theory. The conclusion, along with the entirety of the book, suggests family as a critical site for illuminating broader sociocultural implications of mass platformization.

Grounded in platform studies and the sociology of the family, the book takes families—not platforms—as its starting point, explicitly rejecting technological determinism. A rigorous study of how family is platformized, the book suggests, centers the lived experiences and agency of families of myriad positionalities and structures. This conceptual move is a major strength—it lends itself to analyses remarkably free of the moral panic that pervades some accounts of platforms' role in family life *and* the technological optimism that plagues others. The book thus sets forth an agenda for nuanced research that foregrounds the agency of real-life families.

Drawing on Erstad, Hegna, Livingstone, Negru-Subtirica, and Stoilova (2024), the authors advocate a relational and multigenerational, or intergenerational, approach to studying families' entanglement with platforms. Understanding families as constructed by both interactions within a family and with the outside world, the authors encourage scholars to explore how families collaboratively and combatively negotiate platforms—not how isolated family members engage with platforms. Researchers can move beyond a "horizontal" understanding of families' engagement with platforms (for example, how siblings collectively engage with platforms) and seek "vertical" insight into the multigenerational nature of these interactions (p. 97). Understanding family-platform interaction, the authors suggest, requires interrogation of how children, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, and uncles communicate with and about platforms. The authors' commitment to relationality and intergenerationality is critical in moving beyond the intellectual confines of (Western) contexts that prize individualism and the nuclear household.

To capture the relational, multigenerational, and agentic nature of families, the book advocates qualitative methods. “While platforms may be orderly, carefully designed and planned by big tech,” Livingstone and Sefton-Green write, “families are intimate, diverse, messy, physical and organised around emotional and care needs” (p. 11). A robust understanding of the platformization of the family transcends the quantification and datafication of platformization, instead embracing qualitative methods that honor the emotionality and chaos of family life. Chapter 5 advocates using “hybrid methods” (p. 78)—online and offline methods in tandem—that dismantle the reductive real-life/in-person vs. virtual/online binary and meet the modern moment in which real-life and online are inextricable.

The authors also recommend participatory methods to navigate the ethically fraught nature of multigenerational research with families, including engagement with children and the elderly. They offer rich examples of interacting with vulnerable family members through codesign and arts-based methods, which destabilize researcher/participant power hierarchies, encourage participants with limited lexical capacity to creatively express themselves, and empower families to resist injustice. The book could benefit, however, from a discussion of the potential for codesign methods to exploit the labor of the marginalized participants they seek to serve, and how researchers employing codesign methods might circumvent such exploitation.

In their ambitious conclusion, the editors identify key features of platformization and family life to conceptualize how platforms and families operate on and through each other. They describe three layers of platformization that inform family life: macro (global platform society), meso (platformization of state and commercial infrastructures), and micro (individuals’ negotiation of digital platforms). These layers intersect with four dimensions of family life: their structure as *collective* units of *unique* individuals; their simultaneous internal (within-family) and external (outside family) engagements; relationality (i.e., families construct themselves via relational practices); and intergenerationality. As the layers and dimensions intersect, platforms inform family life, and families resist and develop creative uses for platforms. This conceptualization brings clarity to the messy, dynamic entanglement of platformization with family life.

The editors propose a theoretical framework—extended-domestication theory—to inform scholarship on the platformization of the family. Extended-domestication theory expands on domestication theory, developed in the 1980s and 1990s by media and family scholars such as Roger Silverstone (pp. 100–101), according to which examining human engagement with technology (particularly television) in the micro-context of family life can explain and predict how broader society engages with technology. Extended-domestication theory accounts for the embeddedness and pervasiveness of digital technology—namely, platforms—in a 21st-century global society. No longer do discrete periods of engagement (for example, collectively viewing a 30-minute television show) mark families’ relationship with digital technologies; instead, the digital world saturates domestic life. Extended-domestication theory stimulates scholarly interrogation of how families’ engagement with platforms informs and reveals that of broader society.

There are at least two opportunities to expand the authors’ conceptualization of the platformization of the family. First, future work can explore how socioeconomically marginalized families

experience platformization; the primary studies supporting the book's arguments appear to examine mostly working-, middle- or upper-middle-class families. Second, future scholarship could engage with social media influencer families. These families platformize themselves by transforming their ostensibly authentic domestic lives into lucrative brands on social media platforms. Such an extreme case of family platformization might illuminate, complicate, and challenge key characteristics of and trends associated with the platformization of the family. This work, and other studies interrogating the relationship between platforms and families, can ground itself in and build on the robust framework presented in *The Platformization of the Family*.

References

Corner, J. (1995). *Television form and public address*. London, UK: Hodder Education.

Erstad, O., Hegna, K., Livingstone, S., Negru-Subtirica, O., & Stoilova, M. (2024). How digital technologies become embedded in family life across generations: Scoping the agenda for researching "platformised relationality." *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 13(2), 164–180. doi:10.1332/20467435Y2024D000000023

Goulden, M. (2019). "Delete the family": Platform families and the colonisation of the smart home. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(7), 903–920. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2019.1668454