Review

Platform socialism: How to reclaim our digital future from big tech

In April 2022, Elon Musk announced, to much shock and speculation, that he had entered into a deal to buy Twitter—and take it private—for $44 billion. Over the course of the next few weeks, Musk made sweeping proclamations about how he would 'fix' Twitter—suggestions that were often met with vocal disapproval, even outrage, from users. And while the deal is, at the time of this writing, not yet finalized, it serves as a vivid reminder of the pressing need to think deeply and seriously about who, precisely, controls digital technologies, what decisions they make, and for whose benefit.

James Muldoon's *Platform Socialism* is well-poised to help us do just that. Though much of the contemporary discourse around 'fixing' digital technologies tends to emphasize a constellation of discrete issues—namely, 'privacy, data, and size' (p. 2)—focusing on these in isolation overlooks the larger systemic questions about decision-making power that underlie all these issues: who has that power and what they do with it. As the Musk example makes clear, the platforms that support so much of our daily lives and social interactions are controlled by a small group of elites who remain largely unaccountable for their decisions. If we want to fully realize the democratic potential of digital platforms, Muldoon persuasively argues, we must disperse this power by reorganizing the digital economy around 'social ownership of digital assets and democratic control over the infrastructure and systems that govern our digital lives' (p. 3). *Platform Socialism*—as both a book and concept—provides a compelling model for how we might tackle the problems associated with digital technologies in ways that facilitate the collective self-determination that characterizes democratic life.

Accessible and well-written, *Platform Socialism* effectively uses examples to both explain the ways that platform capitalism currently exploits and alienates users and communities and suggest alternative models for organizing our digital lives. The discussions of Facebook (chapter 2) and Airbnb (chapter 3) are especially powerful; together, they confront the reader with the ways that today's platforms work to 'capture and control the bonds of community itself and extract

informational resources from them' (p. 33). Unsatisfied with simply extracting labor value, the platform economy monetizes the very relationships that make us human. Even more insidiously, they do so under the guise of 'community empowerment' and a 'social mission' (p. 50), a practice of what Muldoon calls 'community-washing' that conveniently obscures the often-devastating effect of these platforms on the very communities they claim to empower.

If the book's first three chapters effectively reveal just how devastating Big Tech is for collective self-determination and community life more broadly, the remaining chapters consider how a turn to platform socialism could help remedy these effects. Drawing primarily from two early twentieth-century thinkers—G.D.H. Cole and Otto Neurath—Muldoon develops a theory of platform socialism that centers community, rather than the state or workers alone, as the locus of decision-making. Highlighting existing success stories—like platform co-ops (Up&Go), civic platforms (Barcelona en Comú, Decidim), and data commons (Wikipedia, Creative Commons), as well as distributed social networks (Mastodon)—Muldoon also spins compelling hypotheticals (like city-owned versions of Uber and Airbnb or a not-for-profit Google) that together emphasize the point that platform socialism, though it may serve as a regulative ideal, is not *idealistic*; it already exists in multiple forms. What Muldoon argues is for this model to be taken up at scale.

Importantly, Muldoon stresses that the widespread adoption of platform socialism does not necessitate large-scale central planning. Instead, he argues, 'Democratic platforms should be governed by a principle of subsidiarity—services should be delivered by the most local and proximate level that would be able to undertake the task efficiently, sustainably and in the manner that would maximize its benefit for users' (p. 85). There is no one-size-fits-all model for governing digital platforms because each platform serves different roles and different constituencies. For example, a short-term rental app is best managed at a municipal level because it is rooted in the geographic space of existing cities and towns; the unique value of social networks and search engines, however, requires that they have a global reach and thus global governance.

Still, *Platform Socialism* does give more general guidance on how varied platforms should be managed. At every level, Muldoon argues, platforms should adopt multi-stakeholder, participatory governance structures that include not just employees but also users and community members (or their representatives) in decision-making processes. And, again, Muldoon notes that there are existing models that we can draw on for inspiration. On the streaming platform Resonate, for example, governance is shared between artists, listeners, and workers (p. 87).

The detail of Muldoon's proposals is one of *Platform Socialism*'s strengths; his examples enliven the concept of platform socialism and serve to convince the reader that this is a realistic goal. Yet the specificity of many of Muldoon's examples—including a not-for-profit Google (pp. 124–128) and a publicly owned Uber ('RideLondon', pp. 112–114)—also works to underscore just how daunting

the 'social networking' problem remains, even within the framework of platform socialism.

Here the importance of context becomes clear. Muldoon spends a significant amount of time discussing civic, mostly municipal, platforms (chapter 6) and with good reason. These are perhaps the most straightforward case: platforms like Airbnb, Uber, and 'e-government' platforms like Decidim or Barcelona en Comú, provide services that are tied to a specific geographic locale where the infrastructure required for collective decision-making often already exists. In the case of the hypothetical 'RideLondon' app, for example, the change *Platform Socialism* proposes is simply adding Uber to the roster of existing Transport for London services. But no similar infrastructure currently exists for 'global digital services' (chapter 7) like Facebook, Twitter, and Google. So what new governance structures do these platforms require?

Muldoon provides some answers to this question: he proposes a new UN agency that would 'provid[e] digital services to the world' (p. 126). And he advocates a 'fediverse' model of social networking—along the lines of Mastodon—that would 'empower users and give them greater autonomy and control over their online publishing and communication' (p. 132) and 'guarantee individual autonomy within a larger federal system' (p. 133). In this system, perennial challenges of, for example, content moderation would be 'democratically decided by actual communities of users … [who] could make their own decisions about the kinds of speech they would tolerate on their platforms' (p. 135).

But in order for actual communities of users to make these decisions, those communities must understand themselves as such. And it is here that *Platform Socialism* falters slightly. It is not clear that all Facebook or Twitter users think of themselves as in community with one another. Though we rightly think of these platforms as 'public goods', the publics associated with them remain, as John Dewey (1946, p. 109) might say, 'inchoate and unorganized'. And without publics fully aware of themselves, and organized to make decisions, the 'ideals of equality, open access, and transparency' (p. 126) that Muldoon calls for are likely to be of little use; collective self-determination requires, above all, a self-conscious *collective*.

This is not to say such community life is impossible at a global scale. But the examples of successful digital communities that Muldoon highlights raise further questions about what makes them so robust. Mastodon, 'a decentralized alternative to Twitter' (p. 133), seems to solidly align with the platform socialist model: it is a not-for-profit, user-controlled, open-source platform. By contrast, Reddit, which Muldoon also approvingly cites (p. 133), is a privately owned, for-profit company. While both are examples of digital democratic communities, the substantive difference in their ownership structures is a challenge for *Platform Socialism*'s approach to social networking. Alongside questions of ownership and control, it seems there are additional factors to consider when building self-determining

digital social networks: namely, questions of design—the ways these platforms structure relationships between their users and whether they incentivize the kind of communal identity upon which platform socialism depends.

To be clear, the complexity of the social networking question does not undermine Muldoon's argument, nor does it undercut the value of platform socialism as an analytic concept or political agenda. Indeed, *Platform Socialism* identifies the most pressing challenge facing digital platforms—how to ensure collective self-determination—so well, precisely because it not only acknowledges but celebrates the rich community life that digital platforms facilitate. In this, it both more accurately reflects the value of digital platforms and provides more realistic strategies for preserving that value into the future.

Overall, *Platform Socialism* is a timely and exciting intervention into discussions of Big Tech. By focusing on decision-making processes, it successfully reframes contemporary debates away from discrete problems and instead captures the larger systemic dynamics that inform these issues and make our current approaches exploitative. By centering community, it more precisely identifies the reasons why these platforms remain popular with billions of users and provides institutional solutions that will ensure that rich social life is designed and maintained by, and for, the people.

Reference

Dewey, J. (1946) *The public and its problems: An essay in political inquiry*. Gateway Books.

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