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## Article

# Introduction to the special issue on Locating and theorising platform power

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Volume 13 Issue 2



## Introduction to the special issue on Locating and theorising platform power

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**Keywords:** Platform power, Governance, Infrastructure, Markets, Relational

**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of ongoing public and political debates about the power and regulation of large platform conglomerates, this special issue calls for more critical, conceptual, and empirical studies on platform power. While a lot of valuable research has already been done, we see a tendency in both public and scholarly debates on leading platform companies to develop one-sided, monolithic understandings of this power. Instead, we want to argue for a relational perspective, which focuses on the relations of dependence that grow around specific platforms. Therefore, contributions locate and theorise platform power. Through specific case studies on particular types of platforms the contributions home in on the various modalities of power. The papers address three broader themes that speak to the different facets of platform power: (1) analysing platform infrastructures and markets; (2) platform governance; (3) the negotiation of platform power and its alternatives.

## PAPERS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

↓ Introduction to the special issue on Locating and theorising platform power

David Nieborg, *Department of Arts, Culture and Media, University of Toronto, Canada, david.nieborg@utoronto.ca*

Thomas Poell, *University of Amsterdam, Netherlands*

The platform behind the curtain: Obfuscated brokerage on retail trading platforms

Andreas Gregersen, *University of Copenhagen*

Jacob Ørmen, *University of Copenhagen*

Monitoring infrastructural power: Methodological challenges in studying mobile infrastructures for datafication Stine Lomborg, *University of Copenhagen*

Kristian Sick Svendsen, *University of Copenhagen*

Sofie Flensburg, *University of Copenhagen*

Signe Sophus Lai, *University of Copenhagen*

Platform power in AI: The evolution of cloud infrastructures in the political economy of artificial intelligence Dieuwertje Luitse, *University of Amsterdam*

Observing “tuned” advertising on digital platforms Nicholas Carah, *University of Queensland*

Lauren Hayden, *University of Queensland*

Maria-Gemma Brown, *University of Queensland*

Daniel Angus, *Queensland University of Technology*

Aimee Brownbill, *Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education*

Kiah Hawker, *University of Queensland*

Xue Ying Tan, *Queensland University of Technology*

Amy Dobson, *Curtin University*

Brady Robards, *Monash University*

Protocol power: Matter, IoT interoperability, and a critique of industry self-regulation Colin Crawford, *Concordia University*

Platform lobbying: Policy influence strategies and the EU's Digital Services Act

Robert Gorwa, *Berlin Social Science Center (WZB)*

Grzegorz Lechowski, *Free University of Berlin*

Daniel Schnei , *Kiel University*

Copyright callouts and the promise of creator-driven platform governance Blake

Hallinan, *Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

CJ Reynolds, *Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

Omer Rothenstein, *Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

The contingencies of platform power and risk management in the gig economy

Niels van Doorn, *University of Amsterdam*

Platforms' regulatory disruptiveness and local regulatory outcomes in Europe

Eliska Drapalova, *Berlin Social Science Center (WZB)*

Kai Wegrich, *Hertie School*

How platform power undermines diversity-oriented innovation Paula Helm, *University of Amsterdam*

## Introduction to the special issue on Locating and theorising platform power

There is little debate among scholars or politicians about the need to regulate Big

Tech. Even tech CEOs themselves have chimed in to advocate for “new rules” to “govern the Internet” (Zuckerberg, 2019). As a result, the pages of this journal are filled with studies of a string of policy interventions. Some of the recently introduced regulatory frameworks, such as the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), Digital Services Act (DSA), Digital Markets Act (DMA), and AI Act (AIA) are as ambitious as they are sweeping. Of particular interest to us are those frameworks dealing with platform companies in their role as for-profit corporations, which naturally leads us to the DSA and DMA. The premise underlying these frameworks is clear: digital service providers have the potential of engaging in and exploiting unfair business practices. That is, so-called “core platform services” can lead to “extreme scale economies,” as well as a “a significant degree of dependence of both business users and end users” (DMA, 2022). Because of scale, asymmetries, and dependencies a select number of service providers have been designated as so-called “gatekeepers.” As of September 2023, these gatekeepers are Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, ByteDance, Meta, and Microsoft – with online travel agency Booking.com added in May 2024. These seven gatekeepers are in a unique position, as argued in the DMA, to “exercise control over whole platform ecosystems in the digital economy”. As such, the DMA is clearly informed by, and one could even say somewhat in dialogue with, two decades of scholarship on the growing economic footprint of platform companies. For example, notions such as “multisidedness” and “multi-homing” come straight out of economics and management literatures (cf. Rietveld & Schilling, 2021). Likewise, the DMA states that gatekeepers operate a series of “core platform services.” This distinction between platform corporations in their role as conglomerates versus the many individual services they provide is something we explored in our own work in this journal, where we highlighted the need for analytical precision when analysing complex platform relationships (van Dijck et al., 2019).

These landmark regulations demonstrate once more how vital it has been to develop a versatile conceptual and empirical toolkit to understand and curtail the complex business practices of platform companies. That being said, our work as critical platform scholars is far from done. On the contrary, these regulations are inherently limited in scope. The DMA’s focus and mandate – which, to state the obvious, has a strong market-oriented imprint – could very well be its weakness, especially for those seeking to limit those forms of power and control beyond the direct operation of markets. Likewise, the DMA and DSA are limited in that they primarily focus on the most powerful platforms, designated as “gatekeepers”. This built-in reactivity presents a myriad of challenges at the dawn of fast evolving technology and rapidly emerging platform companies. Lastly, another obvious limi-

tation of both Acts is, of course, the limits of EU's jurisdiction. The gatekeepers among the platform companies think geopolitically; they are notorious for arbitrating regulation, testing the limits of data sovereignty, and weakening or even downright negating effective enforcement (Cohen, 2019).

It is against the backdrop of these ongoing public and political debates that we see the necessity for more critical, conceptual, and empirical research on platform power. While a lot of valuable research has already been done, we see a tendency in both public and scholarly debates on dominant platform companies to develop one-sided, monolithic understandings of platform power. Instead, we want to argue for a relational perspective, which focuses on the relations of dependence that grow around specific platforms. Therefore, our call for papers for this special issue asked contributors to *locate* and *theorise* platform power. It is through specific case studies on particular types of platforms that we can home in on different modalities of platform power. To that end, we invited authors to reflect on two broader questions: *where* do relations of power take shape and *how* are relationships between platforms, third parties, and end users organised? This approach forces the conversation to go beyond the recognition that platform companies constitute all-powerful entities. Instead, the value of critical platform scholarship lies in greater specificity that aims to locate, analyse, and theorise the wide variety of services that together constitute platform power. Likewise, the different contributions in this special issue go beyond the market- and consumer-oriented focus of European legislation.

Our call was met by responses from scholars across the fields of media and communication studies. In June 2023, we brought the selected authors together in a workshop at the University of Amsterdam to discuss their draft papers. In this way all papers received an early round of peer review by their fellow contributors. And more importantly, the workshop facilitated cross paper dialogue, which is essential in a fragmented field of research. After this, all papers went through the journal's regular peer review process. In the remainder of this introduction, we will build on the workshop conversations and the work done in the papers. But first, we will reflect on recent scholarship that engages with the concept of "platform power". This allows us to provide a more precise conceptual map of the different *foci* among academic disciplines. Many of these past interventions tend to play out within the confines of self-defined disciplinary silos, conferences, and journals. Dialogues across the fields of media and communications, geography, economics and strategic management are still quite rare. In this special issue our aim has been to enable such interdisciplinary dialogues. In the second part of this introduction, we

discuss individual contributions and slot them in three broader themes that speak to the different facets of platform power: (1) analysing platform infrastructures and markets; (2) platform governance; (3) the negotiation of platform power and its alternatives.

## Theorising platform power

The notion of platform power has gained widespread purchase among a range of disciplines. For this special issue, we started the debate by understanding platforms as “data infrastructures that facilitate, aggregate, monetise and govern interactions between end-users and content and service providers” (Poell et al., 2021, p. 5). And we proposed to approach power in platform markets and infrastructures as *relational*, but also *highly uneven*, resulting in power asymmetries and unequal dependencies. Simply put, if a platform operates at a very large scale, it is in a unique position to set rules and standards that are favourable to the platform itself, as well as to those groups of “complementors” — platform-dependent corporations — and end-users a platform deems (more) valuable (Rietveld et al., 2020). This understanding implies a dynamic view of how control is exercised. Emerging or niche platform companies, the vast majority of which are not designated as gatekeepers, have much more of an incentive to keep all its users on board. In this sense, we assume that power is not held by a specific actor, but that it emerges from and shapes unequal relations between actors (Emirbayer, 1997). The contributors to the special issue were, of course, free to propose alternative understandings of platforms and other approaches to power, which they did. As we will see in the next section, they have done so to great effect, thereby broadening the scope of our collective analysis and understanding.

In reviewing past scholarship, we noticed that theorising and locating platform power necessarily go together and can be seen as a series of widening circles. First, building on early instances of platform scholarship (Rochet & Tirole, 2003), we find the work of what we could call *platform purists*. Typically located in business schools, one of the most prolific groups of authors are those that share a remarkably consistent set of theories on platforms as operators of multi-sided markets. If it is not a multi-sided market, it is simply not a platform from this perspective. Put differently, the notion of a platform is not a metaphor, nor as communication scholars would say a term beset with a specific set of discursive politics (Gillespie, 2010). On the contrary, the understanding of what platforms are is quite sedimented in business studies — they are seen as “matchmakers” (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016) or intermediaries that facilitate transactions between differ-

ent sides in the market: end-users and complementors. The latter group can be quite varied, ranging from a homogenous group of drivers, in the case of ride-sharing platforms, to a heterogenous group of advertisers, governments, content creators, and service providers, in the case of the platform services operated by Meta Inc.. The implicit assumption of this scholarship is that platforms are corporations and thus analysis focuses on the functioning of platform markets and their competitive dynamics. Seen from this perspective, platform power is *endogenous*: it emerges from the ability of platform corporations to engage with those actors and users it has direct control over. Such control is in the service of capturing revenue and can be deployed to subsidize specific user groups, to deny them access, or engage in content or user sorting and matching. This line of scholarship has become increasingly mindful of a platform company's ability to control its "interfaces" or its infrastructural "boundaries" (Gawer, 2021). Our own work (Poell et al., 2021; van Dijck et al., 2019) has benefitted immensely from the conceptual richness and empirical consistency marshalled by the platform purists.

Closely related to the analytical focus of business scholars are those who seek to investigate the infrastructural, organisational, and economic politics of corporate control exerted by platform companies (Plantin et al., 2018; Poell et al. 2021; Srnicek, 2017). These platform studies scholars examine how platform companies build large computational or data infrastructures, on which extensive ecosystems of complementors come to depend (Helmond et al., 2019). Similarly, much critical work on platform governance – that is, the governance *by* platforms of end-users and complementors – also takes an *endogenous* view of platform power (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020; DeNardis & Hackl, 2015; Gorwa, 2019). This work demonstrates how platforms exert power by moderating and curating users and content and by setting terms and standards. Likewise, legal scholars have developed a vocabulary and considered legal instruments to more effectively address platform power, taking the platform company as the unit of analysis and its ability to control its relationships with either third-party corporations, end-users, or both (Cohen, 2019; Khan, 2018). Finally, media and communication scholars unpacked platform power by theorising more specific forms of corporate control that impact end-users first and foremost, coining terms such as "metric power" (Beer, 2016), "algorithmic power" (Bucher, 2018), "data power" (Cheney-Lippold, 2017), and "curatorial power" (Prey, 2020). Implicit in these studies is the fact that platforms already achieved a position of economic dominance. The platforms under investigation are not newly launched start-ups, but the well-known collective of gatekeeper incumbents.

Second, if an endogenous view is concerned with how platforms exert direct con-



trol over the markets and infrastructures they operate, an *exogenous* view on platform power theorises and analyses forms of power native to the realm of policy, politics, and governance. Political scientists have theorised such power as “instrumental” – the use of corporate and financial resources “allow economic interests to influence political outcomes” (Culpepper & Thelen, 2020, p. 292) – and “structural power”, or the ability of corporations to shape the ecosystems in which they operate. The analytical scope of these inquiries moves beyond the platform/complementor/end-user relationship. Examples include: the ability of platform corporations to influence the role and position of competitors: think of Meta Inc. lobbying against ByteDance on geopolitical grounds (Gray, 2021); the lobbying of politicians to weaken privacy rights; or the setting of industry standards.

Important to note is that the endogenous and exogenous perspectives on platform power are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. Instrumental and structural power increase significantly after a platform attains a gatekeeper position. To gain insight in this process of switching from start-up company to incumbent conglomerate, it is essential, as we have argued in an earlier contribution to this journal, to combine different disciplinary approaches (Poell et al., 2019). For starters, the growth of multi-sided platform markets is facilitated by large computational infrastructures, which enable seamless, and personalised transactions among complementors and end-users. *Vice versa*, the development of such infrastructures is supported by the vast financial resources which platform companies can mobilise, because of their central position in the digital economy. This position, in turn, allows such companies to exert substantial structural and instrumental power: by governing their platform markets and infrastructures, and by influencing policy making and political decision making. Ultimately, drawing such connections – between platform markets, infrastructures, and governance – can only be adequately understood by drawing on the different strands of platform research and theory.

## **Analysing & locating platform power**

In the following three sections, we will discuss how this special issue brings the different strands of platform scholarship together. We will start by highlighting the insights from four papers that examine how power is exercised through platform infrastructures and markets. Subsequently, the second theme discusses three papers that approach platform power from a governance perspective. Finally, theme 3 consists of three interventions that discuss how platform power is negotiated.



## Theme 1: Platform infrastructures & markets

Business scholars have led us to believe that platform markets can be straightforward in their design. But in practice, how platform markets operate, and even more so, how platform companies control markets is full of conflict and contradiction. Studying such messiness warrants a focus on individual platforms, taking an endogenous view. The same can be said of the study of platform infrastructures and the power that emerges from a platform company's investments in its material building blocks.

In "The platform behind the curtain: Obfuscated brokerage on retail trading platforms", Danish media scholars Andreas Gregersen and Jacob Ørmen examine eToro, a leading retail trading platform that allows users to trade in speculative assets, such as stocks and cryptocurrencies. The platform was founded in Israel in 2007 and services over 20 million users in more than 140 countries. In many respects, the platform is a prototypical, what management scholars would call "transaction platform", as it serves as an exchange. What's unique to eToro is that its revenue increases when users engage in, the authors argue, "risky trading" via a plethora of derivative products. When the latter are traded, the platform benefits when traders lose. This misalignment can be witnessed at other platforms as well (Rieder & Sire, 2014). In the case of eToro, the platform has similar conflicts of interest: what is good for the platform and its users are not necessarily the same. Through an analysis of three different types of brokerage – financial, informational, and social – the authors demonstrate how the platform obfuscates its different roles and operations to mask that eToro is not just an exchange, or transaction platform. Instead, the platform actively steers users toward a preferred set of assets. It can do so strategically leveraging information asymmetries. It becomes clear once again that platforms, in their role as market makers, are the only actors that have a full view of how their markets operate. Through their investigation, Gregersen and Ørmen skillfully illustrate how platform power "compounds" through this interweaving of brokerage roles as it allows eToro to exploit its gatekeeping position. The article puts the conversation about economic conflicts of interest back on the agenda when debating platform power.

Whereas Gregersen and Ørmen make a powerful argument about the need for market transparency, platform infrastructures are equally opaque (Rieder & Hoffmann, 2020). Being able to make infrastructure more observable and thereby legible to legal scholars and policymakers, is key for holding platforms accountable (Leerssen, 2024). To that end, this special issue has pushed authors to engage with two simple questions: where does infrastructural platform power reside? And, how

is it evolving? A trio of papers has taken on this challenge, each in different ways, demonstrating the necessity of rigorous empirical work, or deep dives into the infrastructural platform stack if you will.

First, in "Monitoring infrastructural power: Methodological challenges in studying mobile infrastructures for datafication" the Copenhagen-based research group of Stine Lomborg and colleagues engage directly with the challenge of localisation. Their focus is on the process of datafication in mobile infrastructures and their object of study are so-called software development kits (SDKs) that allow for third-party tracking of users to facilitate digital advertising. While SDKs are the primary material means to gather and disseminate mobile data, they are notoriously understudied (Pybus & Coté, 2024). As Lomborg et al. show, this can be explained because of inability to access mobile infrastructures, particularly Apple's iOS mobile operating system. As a result, infrastructural methods are "fragile and in urgent need of development". In this article, 1,129 apps are investigated. This more ambitious empirical scope is made possible because of the authors' involvement in the Datafied Living research project. Lomborg et al., once more make clear how Apple and Alphabet effectively constitute a mobile duopoly that allows them to protect and enhance their "assets in related data markets." Similar to Gregersen and Ørmen, the market-making abilities of app store providers may grant said companies with market transparency, however, scholars, users, and lawmakers are faced with a complete lack of "transparency, systematic democratic monitoring, and ultimately regulation". Those who seek to engage in counter-intelligence methods and measures are frustrated at every turn.

Second, Dieuwertje Luitse provides us with an impressive overview of the infrastructural investments in AI infrastructures by leading platform companies Amazon, Microsoft, and Google. The article "Platform power in AI: The evolution of cloud infrastructures in the political economy of artificial intelligence" demonstrates how committed platforms are to owning the entire infrastructural hardware stack, plus associated services. Luitse's approach shows the value of combining a macro-level political-economic analysis with a detailed, micro-material investigation of three cloud AI platforms: AWS, Microsoft Azure, and Google Cloud. A comprehensive source of data is analysed: archived product and developer pages, corporate blog posts and press releases, and relevant media or industry reports. Given the sense of urgency among platform companies to invest in AI technology, the infrastructure under investigation is anything but static. Therefore, the analysis considers the infrastructure's "evolutionary trajectories" between January 2017 and April 2021 to conclude that infrastructural power in this sector accumulates in

three ways: through vertical integration, through complementary innovations, and through “the power of abstraction”. These dynamics are complementary, and the third dynamic is particular to AI. As a result, this paper shows the herculean task that confronts those that want to critically evaluate and regulate evolving AI technologies.

The third paper taking an infrastructural perspective, “Observing ‘tuned’ advertising on digital platforms”, by Nicholas Carah and his Australia-based colleagues, has a similar mandate as Luitse, to make complex platform infrastructures more legible. If one thinks AI technology is hard to comprehend for laypersons, the world of digital advertising is somehow even harder to grasp; an ecosystem that has been evolving for over two decades and presents a notoriously slippery object of study (Crain, 2021). Spurred by advertising-funded platforms such as Google (Alphabet) and Facebook (Meta), one of the latest developments in digital advertising concerns “tuned advertising”, a process of hyper-targeted advertising in which “ads are continuously algorithmically ‘optimised’ to users in real time”. How, then, to observe this complex, black-boxed practice? Considering the large team of scholars associated with this project, the answer is that one needs interdisciplinary skills to even begin to answer this question. In other words, this paper, similar to Lomborg et al.’s work on SDKs and advertising, shows the value of well-funded, multi-year research projects. To access ad libraries to conduct their investigations, the team members build customised tools to gather ads from platform ad libraries, as well as through “data donations” from “citizen scientists”. The paper not only advances our understanding of the latest, and perhaps not-so-greatest in digital advertising, but also shows how infrastructural platform power is procedural. That is, the authors argue that for companies such as Meta, their power stems from the ability to “tune”, a process driven by proprietary AI technology. To understand such systems, observing ad libraries, which show the result of tuning, is not enough. What is needed is interdisciplinary capacity to observe the dynamic “socio-technical process of tuning” itself in order to advance accountability.

## **Theme 2: Platform governance / governance by platforms**

Turning from platform markets and infrastructures to governance, it’s vital to reiterate that these institutional dimensions of platform power are closely entangled. Controlling key markets and infrastructures allows platform companies to play a leading role in online governance and exert political power. The three papers discussed in this section provide crucial insights into how these relations of power and governance work, as well as how complementors are trying to challenge platform governance.

First, in "Protocol power: Matter, IoT interoperability, and a critique of industry self-regulation", Colin Crawford examines Matter, the industry-led connectivity standard for smart home and Internet of Things (IoT) devices. He probes how technology companies work together to set industry-wide technical standards through the aim or guise of interoperability. Crawford puts forward the concept of "protocol power" to frame this arrangement, wherein major technology companies through the act of cooperation assert and maintain dominance in the IoT marketplace and control over key IoT infrastructure. He defines this form of power as "the disproportionate influence of dominant actors in platform ecosystems to produce and set industry-wide standards and thus determine certain *rules of inclusion* on the technical, existential level of protocol" (2024, p. 4). This arrangement can be seen as a form of power-sharing, but between a select and small number of powerful technology companies, most prominently Google, Samsung, Apple, and Amazon. This mode of infrastructural power is presented as industry self-regulation with the aim of interoperability and increased connectivity, but effectively creates opportunities for services, subscription, and data accumulation for the involved technology companies. In other words, when studying platform power, it is vital to be attentive to the intricate ways in which leading technology companies exert influence by collaborating and setting technical standards.

The second paper in this theme, "Platform lobbying: Policy influence strategies and the EU's Digital Services Act", by Robert Gorwa, Grzegorz Lechowski, and Daniel Schneiß develops an exogenous or instrumental perspective on platform power. These authors analyse how platform companies try to influence policymakers during crucial regulatory episodes. Reviewing the current research on policy influence strategies, they observe that there is a lot of valuable work on platform firms, but the role of specific institutional contexts and related power structures is often neglected. Hence, Gorwa and colleagues develop an institutionally situated approach, analysing platform policy influence during the Digital Services Act (DSA) negotiations in the EU from 2019 to 2022. They examine whether and how platform firms employed what the authors identify as "five fundamental platform policy influence strategies": 1) access lobbying and 2) coalition building, which are both directly targeted at policymakers, 3) mobilisation, 4) public relations, and 5) funding. Based on this analysis, the paper concludes that, in contrast to observations in current research, consumer-facing influence (i.e. mobilisation of consumers) has not been a key strategy of leading platforms trying to shape the DSA. Instead, more traditional strategies – lobbying and coalition building – were employed by Amazon, Meta, Google, Spotify, and other tech companies in the European context. In sum, this study highlights the importance of carefully situating

research on platform power within specific institutional contexts.

Finally, Blake Hallinan and CJ Reynolds examine, in "Copyright callouts and the promise of creator-driven platform governance", challenges to platform power. More specifically, they study how creators confront YouTube's copyright governance through "copyright callouts." This is the practice of publicly complaining about copyright enforcement (and false copyright claims), through public YouTube channels. For Hallinan and Reynolds, copyright callouts serve as a voice-based practice of creator-driven platform governance that is both horizontal (complaints between peers about their copyright practices) and vertical (complaints against corporations, such as platforms and copyright owners). Although the authors note the effectiveness of callouts for accountability, the degree to which both peers and corporations respond to these public complaints needs to be further explored. They argue that horizontal callouts in particular raise important considerations around community governance. These practices, among others, question the boundaries of "the community" on large-scale platforms like YouTube and the relative power of creators with small versus large audiences. Thus, this paper foregrounds the complexity of platform power and governance, which is not simply a top-down exercise but involves many layers of influence and contestation. This leads us to the third theme, the negotiation of platform power.

### **Theme 3: The negotiation of platform power**

As Hallinan and Reynolds make clear, platform power is never absolute. Platform companies accumulate power by keeping the peace. That is, to provide enough economic incentives for workers and complementors to provide their services, or, to provide enough value to end-users to use the platform. This is, of course, the economic theory forwarded by business scholars. In practice, keeping "users on board" is a messy and deeply political process that becomes even more messy when a platform becomes dominant and their economic allegiances (to specific users or user groups) begin to shift (Rietveld et al., 2020).

In "The contingencies of platform power and risk management in the gig economy", Dutch platform labour scholar Niels van Doorn puts the messiness of platform power front and centre. More specifically, he focuses on the question of risk, as faced by platform workers. Those who work for food delivery and domestic cleaning platforms, so-called "gig-workers", are particularly vulnerable when they "get on board". Using "biographical worker narratives" as a form of "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), van Doorn followed gig workers in their day-to-day lives to foreground what has so far existed only in the background of gig economy research;

the social ties, socioeconomic status, and daily responsibilities that mediate gig workers' susceptibility to platform power. By doing so, he highlights what we miss if we solely focus on algorithmic management as the source of subordination, instead of considering the broader socio-economic factors impacting a gig worker's larger work and life trajectories across Amsterdam, Berlin, and New York City.

The negotiations of platform power happen at the local, state, and supra-national level, and manifests themselves not just in rule-making but also in rule-breaking. Eliska Drapalova and Kai Wegrich, both Berlin-based platform scholars, meticulously dispute the widely assumed disruptive nature of locally embedded global platforms. In "Platforms' regulatory disruptiveness and local regulatory outcomes in Europe" they ask: to what extent do big platforms such as Airbnb and Uber ignore existing rules and regulations, often at the local level, and are they successful in challenging the institutional power of the regulatory state? Drapalova and Wegrich put the disruption-thesis to an empirical test and show that sectoral platforms are less disruptive to local regulation than previously assumed. By comparing almost one hundred (local) regulations in the transport and housing sector — ride hailing and apartment sharing platforms — they show how platform operators wrestle with a variety of local governments' responses, forcing them to adjust their practices and succumb to new rules. Indeed, between 2019 and 2022, the platforms' power to significantly influence local regulation declined. Past scholarship has proven that global platforms go through a stage of ambiguity (van Dijck, 2013) in which platform infrastructures, business models, and governance frameworks are negotiated, rejected, or undermined. Drapalova and Wegrich demonstrate, however, how during the next stage of negotiations, regulatory bodies have the capacity to curtail platform power.

Lastly, in "How platform power undermines diversity-oriented innovation", Paula Helm provides an original contribution that lays out the challenges of creating publicly-funded alternatives to corporate platforms. This is a tall order, as one might imagine. Helm looks at the very early stages of a platform that emerges from a four-year Horizon Europe research project. The project's goal was to develop a "diversity-aware online social platform." Helm complicates this notion of diversity. For their method, the author has taken a co-productive approach that blends critical analysis and active engagement as an insider. The paper lists challenges that emerge when scholars and practitioners try to promote diversity. It becomes clear once more how hard it is to deviate from Silicon Valley's innovation and growth imperatives that focus on scale, technological solutionism, rapid scalability through automation, and privileging a narrow problem-solving mentality. Ul-

timately, these growth imperatives, Helm argues, “limit the adoption of alternative platform models from the early stages of planning” (2024, p. 1), thereby, ironically, trapping developers, funders, and scholars in the same dynamic they are seeking to escape.

Taken together, the papers in this section bring together themes from the other two sections. They reiterate the observation that platform power carefully needs to be situated, not just institutionally, but within specific socio-cultural settings and also temporally within the evolution of platforms. Furthermore, it again becomes clear that platform governance is a highly complex process, which takes shape in broader institutional environments that affect how a platform can be organised and whether alternative forms of organisation are possible.

## Conclusion

The contributions to this special issue develop a variety of perspectives on how platform power works, what it does, where it is located, and by whom it is operated. Far from being simply a top-down affair, platform power should be understood as dynamic, recursive sets of relations in which the various stages of platform growth provoke specific responses from users, governments, corporations, civil society and other actors. Platform economies at scale, operated by global tech companies, impact an unprecedented number of users, while being embedded in a score of national infrastructures and governing frameworks. The dynamic nature of these relations as well as the multiple levels on which these take shape, makes it hard to put a finger on where platform power is “located”. Therefore, as we stated in the introduction, we need to develop a versatile conceptual and empirical toolkit to analyse and act upon the complex business practices of platform companies.

Even though we think (supra-)national regulation such as the DMA/DSA framework is an essential step towards curtailing the power of global platform companies, it is not a final answer. On the contrary, as various articles in this special issue have argued, platform power is always negotiated and evolves in response to law-making, law-breaking, and law-evading moves. This process never ends. With the emergence of a new generation of technologies, such as generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), we will face the next stage in this dynamic power struggle. The platform ecosystem that has emerged over the past two decades will likely consolidate – if not expand – its infrastructural power. The gap between Big Tech and the state and civil society actors will arguably widen. Mandated in 2024, the EU AI Act, just as the DMA/DSA, helps to set up rules and boundaries for “gatekeepers” over the next few years. Simultaneously, it will trigger the next round of (re)nego-



tiations over platform power.

What should last longer than the next stage of this power play is the academic toolkit to be deployed towards understanding how power works. Our call for scholarly reflection on the nature of platform power has yielded an intriguing bouquet of responses and insights. We hope the assorted critical concepts, empirical findings, and analytical probes will last beyond the technological hypes of the day and contribute to finding the balance between what works and what's right.

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