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### Abstract

This editorial introduces this special responsive issue on “platform surveillance.” We develop the term *platform surveillance* to account for the manifold and often insidious ways that digital platforms fundamentally transform social practices and relations, recasting them as surveillant exchanges whose coordination must be technologically mediated and therefore made exploitable as data. In the process, digital platforms become dominant social structures in their own right, subordinating other institutions, conjuring or sedimenting social divisions and inequalities, and setting the terms upon which individuals, organizations, and governments interact. Emergent forms of platform capitalism portend new governmentalities, as they gradually draw existing institutions into alignment or harmonization with the logics of platform surveillance while also engendering subjectivities (e.g., the gig-economy worker) that support those logics. Because surveillance is essential to the operations of digital platforms, because it structures the forms of governance and capital that emerge, the field of surveillance studies is uniquely positioned to investigate and theorize these phenomena.

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### Introduction

This is the age of the platform. This issue, the second of our special responsive issues that call for shorter, more accessible articles on key current topics, presents numerous reflections and case studies of the surveillance rationalities undergirding contemporary digital platforms. By platform surveillance, we do not simply mean surveillance that happens to be facilitated by platforms, although that is clearly significant and widespread. Our primary focus is instead on the manifold and often insidious ways that digital platforms fundamentally transform social practices and relations, recasting them as surveillant exchanges whose coordination must be technologically mediated and therefore made exploitable as data. In the process, digital platforms become dominant social structures in their own right, subordinating other institutions, conjuring or sedimenting social divisions and inequalities, and setting the terms upon which individuals, organizations, and governments interact. Digital platforms, in this sense, clearly operate as markets, not simply as market competitors (Pasquale 2017a). More than that, though, the emergent forms of platform capitalism portend new governmentalities, as they gradually draw existing institutions into alignment or harmonization with the logics of platform surveillance while also engendering subjectivities (e.g., the gig-economy worker) that support those logics. This depiction should not be read as facile technological determinism. After all, recent legal restrictions placed upon platforms like Airbnb and Uber by cities demonstrate that platforms are subject to mediation, just as the grotesque supplication of cities courting Amazon’s “HQ2” reveals obvious complicity in the face of these pressures. Instead, this description, and indeed this special issue, is offered as a recognition of profound shifts that are underway with the advent and increasing centrality of digital platforms. Because surveillance is essential to the

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operations of platforms, because it structures the forms of governance and capital that emerge, the field of surveillance studies is uniquely positioned to investigate and theorize these phenomena.

As editors, we have no hope of summarizing or even introducing each of the 30+ pieces in this issue—pieces that span a huge range of platforms, written by scholars at all stages of their careers, adopting different approaches, from different disciplines, and with varied politics. We can only encourage you to read them; read them all! What we will do instead is reflect further on the concept of the platform, how and why one might want to talk about platform surveillance, and where there are possibilities for other visions and practices of the platform that might enable more radical alternatives that mitigate or extract destructive surveillance modalities.

## Defining Platforms

One of the biggest initial problems is achieving agreement on what we actually mean by a platform. In just a few short years, the word “platform” has come from very specific origins within computing, been translated through the tech industry, and been integrated into wider society, culture, and politics. It retains traces of those translations, but now stands for a transformation that, read in its maximalist sense, points towards what Michel Foucault (2008) would have called, as he did with neoliberalism, “a new governmentality”—not just a particular kind of organizational form associated with the tech industry and social media, but an entirely new mode of governance, perhaps an authentic political economic descriptor of the structure of the information age.

But let’s start with its origins. While those familiar with French might expect that the term derives from “plafond,” the word for “ceiling,” it seems that this meaning is actually derivative of an early sixteenth-century phrase that originally meant “plan,” “design,” or “framework.” In other words, the emerging encompassing contemporary usage is, in fact, closer to its origins than it is to the way in which the word has been translated in between. Its usage as a term referring to an ideological program is also recorded relatively early, albeit in a religious context, although in an age when all religion was to some extent politics and vice-versa.

However, the immediate origins of the word come from computing. In computing, the term “platform” is relatively modest in its etymology and retains that original sense of a framework. A straightforward definition of a platform is simply that it is the foundation upon which other computing processes are built, or the environment within which such processes run. So, it can refer to many things. Hardware can be a platform. Operating systems can be platforms. Higher-level processes can also be platforms if other applications run within them or depend on them. It retains its minimalist usage in computing, and there have been various attempts to rein it in, to restrict its meaning, particularly from some scholars from the games studies community who tried valiantly both to create and then to control the scope of a subfield that for a while was being called “platform studies” (Bogost and Montfort 2009).

Nonetheless, the renewed expansion of the term was inexorable. Computing terminology spawned a more general usage within the tech industry—that is, the industry that builds upon the ubiquity of computing. Social media can also be understood as platforms in that they form the basis for other activities, which can be experienced and described from the individual user perspective as something with minimal technical knowledge and input, like writing a message or sharing a photograph, and also from the organizational user perspective as data-scraping and sharing for marketing (Gillespie 2010).

From this kind of usage, the term platform is deployed as a metaphor for infrastructural operations in multiple areas, thereby encompassing the sense of a broad framework that re-incorporates the political and economic along the way. This is the maximalist understanding that can be found, for example, in the writing of Benjamin Bratton (2016), who argues that ultimately the platform constitutes a replacement for both corporation and nation-state; however, few in platform corporations have made this claim

themselves, with the notable exception of Mark Zuckerberg (2017; for an analysis, see: Rider and Murakami Wood 2019).

In this way, the platform has returned to its earliest sense of a framework or, one could also say, an infrastructure. This convergence of platforms and infrastructures also invites further critical exploration. Infrastructures establish contexts for practice. They enable, support, and afford certain practices while necessarily disabling, eroding, and resisting others. Whereas classically, one might envision infrastructures as the various forms of hardware that sustain life—the pipes, roads, electrical lines, and communication grids that form the backdrop of modern existence—they manifest analytically as relational properties apprehended through use (Star and Ruhleder 1996; Larkin 2013) or failure (Bowker and Star 1999; Graham and Thrift 2007). Infrastructures are also necessarily political in their differential allocation of resources and services and in their establishment of regimes of capital and violence (Cowen 2014; Parks and Starosielski 2015). As Lauren Berlant (2016: 395) reminds us in a recent essay on infrastructures and the commons, “Politics is also about redistributing insecurity, after all.”

A strong case could be made for the ways that digital platforms are already becoming infrastructural in their properties and effects. Some of this is material: Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Amazon are involved in major undersea cabling consortia and, indeed, directly own increasingly large percentages of cabling worldwide (Zimmer 2018). However, it is also about how platforms are changing in their sociotechnical relations: Jean-Christophe Plantin and Aswin Punathambekar (2019) describe how platforms are achieving a scale and indispensability that competes with the functions of existing public and private infrastructures. A perhaps more pernicious dynamic, though, could be the “platformization of infrastructures,” where essential services or utilities are absorbed into or reprogrammed as exclusionary platform ecosystems (Plantin et al. 2018), engendering new forms of structural violence against marginalized or “risky” populations (Monahan 2017).

With this development, the splintering urbanism trends described by Graham and Marvin (2001) almost two decades ago become reprogrammed and black boxed, mediated by monopolistic platforms whose functionality relies upon surveillance operations. Platform surveillance, then, not only describes relatively new online ecosystems (e.g., Google, Facebook, Uber, Amazon) but also the metamorphosis of traditional infrastructures into platform entities within a larger platform universe, or what Bratton (2016) might call “the stack.”

Both Srnicek (2017a, 2017b) and Manokha (2018) have described the economic logic of the platform as being based in surveillance. It would seem that the concept of platform surveillance has much in common with the term “surveillance capitalism,” popularized by Shoshana Zuboff in an important article (Zuboff 2015) and a massive book (*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 2019), which is the subject of a review section to itself in this issue. Zuboff’s recent work offers an interesting difference in emphasis, and one might expect the editors of the journal *Surveillance & Society* to embrace the term “surveillance capitalism.” However, we have reservations about the totalizing and technological determinist slant of surveillance capitalism as developed by Zuboff, where much of her analysis seems to be premised upon (a less-than-critical acceptance of) the narratives of key technologists and technology enthusiasts and an assumption that the stories that they tell match reality.<sup>1</sup>

Zuboff’s position is also founded in what amounts to a simple American exceptionalism: the (directly stated) idea that the American Revolution created a social form that was uniquely progressive in human political history and that this created a political economic form, which Zuboff calls a “socially reciprocal capitalism,” which worked and was good, and from which surveillance capitalism is “a rogue mutation” (vii). One of Zuboff’s main exemplars of this supposedly normal, socially reciprocal capitalism is Henry

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<sup>1</sup> This tendency is not unique to Zuboff, of course. Technologists are accomplished at generating technological imaginaries that become hegemonic constructs, dictating scenarios of the future to which others feel compelled to respond (Monahan and Mokos 2013; Monahan 2018).

Ford, famously referred to by Adolf Hitler as the leader of the Nazi party in the USA (Wallace 2004). If Ford's corporatist (if not actually fully fascist) logic of production is what counts as the Golden Age, we are in big trouble. In any case, it was not surveillance logic that killed Fordism. The history of the decline and fall of Fordism is well understood in the political economic literature. Fordism was linked to localism and the controlled flow of capital within a nested set of national and local economies. It was killed by the crisis of accumulation that occurred because of the limits of national capitalism, and it was "fixed," as David Harvey and others have shown, by the spatial/territorial logic of neoliberal globalization. The power of nation-states, which had given rise to capitalism as it emerged in the seventeenth century, had to be broken in some ways while being retained in others.

So, as editors and scholars, we see the utility of terms like platform capitalism (Langley and Leyshon, 2017; Srnicek 2017b), while fully accepting the importance of surveillance to this emerging form. But we would go further with Bratton and the likes of McKenzie Wark (2016) in considering this not just as a form of capitalism but also something more, and potentially as not capitalism at all but an emergent political economic form or stage beyond this. This is not to argue that it is "good" or "better" than capitalism but to understand it instead as something that has emerged from capitalism and its logics, not as Zuboff would have it, as something uniquely deviant, but perfectly consistent with the historical logic of capitalism.

Surveillance capitalism in this context is just one of an increasing multitude of terms for a hydra-headed phenomenon that also includes the information economy, affective capitalism, the gig economy, the sharing economy, and many more, and while surveillance may be part of all of them, it is—we argue—more accurately defined only in conjunction with the concept of the platform. Where platforms can go is only just beginning. We have seen how platforms have taken control of how people socialize, how they obtain news of politics and current events, how they obtain entertainment. So far, the model for commodification has been primarily the one identified by Zuboff in the most well-analyzed section of her book in which she identifies the specific innovation made by Google in monetizing the "social exhaust" of users of its search tool to create packages of data about those users for sale to marketers and organizations of all kinds.

However, the platform surveillance model of mass data collection for intrusive targeted advertising has been coming up against a privacy backlash and response from regulatory authorities, in particular the European Union with its recent General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). There have also been scandals around data losses from multiple platforms and data brokers and the misuse of data for political manipulation, particularly on Facebook, spawning a number of ongoing inquiries in several countries. And then there is the fear and loathing—the vicious right-wing politics and related violence, terrorism, and misery—that has prompted even relatively uncritical internet industry publications like *TechCrunch* to start asking questions like, "Where did social media go wrong?" (Evans 2019). It may well be that these articulations of the platform model may be reaching their nadir and are not as assured as they might have seemed even a year ago.

Zuboff has an answer to what comes next. She pictures an inevitable path to a Skinnerian society of rational control, and while there are some indications that this is attractive to some ideologues in various platform companies, there is no real political economic rationality for this—it just doesn't seem to be profitable. Instead, what appears to be emerging is a battle for the "payment space" and specifically how micropayments might be made properly functional in both online and offline spaces (in other words to be able to continuously and consistently monetize the interactions between people and things in various combinations). This has been one of the drivers behind developments in smart transport card systems,<sup>2</sup> and ultimately it would seem to be a more potentially profitable way of instituting interactions within an Internet-of-Things world. Apart from PayPal, the first wave payment platform, both Apple and Google

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<sup>2</sup> We owe this insight to Michael Carter, in the Queen's University Department of Geography, whose PhD thesis examines smart transport cards, particularly the case of Presto in Toronto.

now have electronic payment systems that could build on personal identification already held by both companies, but the recent partnership between Microsoft and Mastercard (2018) to create a system for persistent identification would seem to presage a new kind of infrastructure and an extension of the logic of the platform. The political attraction of this kind of system would be that it would neither constantly datamine individuals nor would it need to target people with marketing messages in the way that the Google model currently functions. This difference makes it superficially at least somewhat privacy-respecting, particularly if the systems could deploy some genuinely functional form of blockchain. None of these things, even were they to work, would do anything to address the fundamental inequalities and injustices of platform capitalism, and globally persistent identification would be the largest and likely most dangerous surveillance system yet devised.

## Reclaiming Platforms

Derek Wall's (2017) recent book on the legacy of the late Elinor Ostrom is founded on the return of the concept of the commons to both economic theory and political discourse. Similarly, the grand sweep of heterodox Japanese Marxist Kojin Karatani's *Structure of World History* (2014) ends with a plea for cooperatives. These two concepts share a combination of a deep legacy of communal and community-oriented practice and history with a radical commitment to working together. The concepts cut across old divisions in radical thought and practice between anarchists, Marxists, and more moderate socialists. In the age of the Internet, a radical strand of practice was already present to various degrees of intensity in open source, open access, and free software movements.

The beginning of a recombination of these movements with the more overtly political recognition of commons and cooperativism has led to the emergence of a movement that specifically recognizes the radical potential of the platform. It is not that the platform is intrinsically radical or more radical than other changes in governmentality and political economy. Rather, it is always at the point of recognition of the massively disruptive influence of any such development when internal contradictions of the current phase of capitalism are (once again) revealed and there is the opportunity to intervene, to shift the direction. Revolutions are not inevitable, they are made, and they are made in multiple ways. In the idea of "platform cooperativism," we see the modest beginnings of such a revolutionary possibility.<sup>3</sup>

The platform could be just another differently shaped vessel for capital accumulation, or it could be a way of finally breaking the alignment of the state and nation and reorienting more ineluctably with capital through pervasive surveillance and the persistent manipulation of data, in an entirely new form of governmentality. However, the breaking of what has been certain since the seventeenth century and the conjoined rise of the nation-state and modern capitalism affords multiple possibilities, some of them more hopeful than others. The task is to see and seize them.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the Platform Cooperative Consortium (<https://platform.coop/consortium>) is growing in support and influence, but it remains tiny when compared to any of the major platform corporations.

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