THE EROSION OF PUBLIC SPACE IN THE PLATFORM SOCIETY: FROM DATA COLONIALISM TO GENERATIVE AI

PLATFORM TOPLUMUNDA KAMUSAL ALANIN EROZYONU: VERİ SÖMÜRGECİLİĞİNDEN ÜRETKEN YAPAY ZEKÂYA

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Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.

In the decades between the 20th and 21st centuries, the transition occurred from a networked society based on the Internet as an open technology to the current platform society, where services are provided almost exclusively by a few large private companies.

We are living today in the dawn of data colonialism, a phenomenon far more pervasive than the simple issue of Big Tech's appropriation of personal data. In fact, despite the widespread metaphor of data as "new oil", the data collected and transformed into wealth by platforms are not natural resources but are instead actively constructed and pre-structured by the platforms themselves according to opaque and non-transparent logic.

In the context of this discussion, we also focus on generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), defining it and outlining its capabilities. The generative AI tools currently available are also privately owned and opaque in their operation, following instructions, rules and limits that are protected by industrial secrecy and which the community cannot know in detail.

Alongside the unprecedented potential and opportunities that must be recognised, in the contemporary digital scenario, there is also the risk of a progressive erosion of public space for discussion and comparison, limited upstream by rules of the game decided at a table at which citizens and civil society cannot participate.

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From Network Society to Platform Society

History and evolution: Network society, connected society, platform society

The transition from the network society to the platform society represents a fundamental evolution in the structure of communication and social interaction in the decades between the 20th and 21st centuries. The "network society" has been defined as a model in which digital communication technologies, particularly the Internet, facilitate a reorganisation of social relations around networks of information flows. In this context, the Internet represents an open and decentralised network that promotes new forms of interaction and cooperation (Castells, 1996).

Over the years, the concept of "network society" has given way to that of "connected society", which describes how digital networks support "networked individualism" (Rainie & Wellman, 2012): a model of social organisation in which individuals build and manage personal networks of relationships, adaptable and flexible, that replace traditional structures of social belonging. Networked individualism emphasises how digital connectivity enables the formation of more personalised and tailored social bonds, reflecting individual needs for communication and interaction.

Today, we find ourselves in a new phase of this transformation: the "platform society" (Van Dijck et al., 2018), characterised by the centrality of private commercial digital platforms as predominant mediators of social interactions. Platforms are not simply passive infrastructures, but active actors that shape social dynamics through algorithmic and commercial logics. Not only do they facilitate the connection between users, but they also determine which content to promote and which to suppress, as well as how users can interact with one another. All this is at the basis of the business model and the economic success of a few gigantic conglomerates of high-tech companies (essentially five: *Google-Alphabet*, *Amazon*, *Facebook-Meta*, *Apple*, and *Microsoft*) that, through an aggressive policy of acquiring potential competitors, are dividing up the market of online services.

Digital society after the pandemic: from the public space of the Internet to the private space of commercial platforms

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of digital platforms in everyday life has suddenly accelerated. While the Internet was initially conceived as an open, accessible and decentralised public space (Paccagnella, 2010), the growing importance of digital platforms has led to a progressive shift towards private and commercial spaces controlled by a few large companies. This shift has been accentuated by the urgent need for digital tools to maintain social and professional connections during periods of lockdown, isolation and social restrictions, further strengthening the power of commercial

platforms in managing online interactions.

Digital platforms have thus consolidated and expanded their role as the main intermediaries of social interactions during the pandemic, offering fast and effective solutions for communication, work and entertainment. However, this dominance raises significant concerns about the loss of user autonomy and the lack of transparency in platform operations. Tools such as *Zoom*, *Microsoft Teams* or *Google Classroom* have become essential for the continuity of daily activities. Still, their ownership structure and data management policies have created new forms of dependency and control (Zuboff, 2019).

This general migration towards services offered (often "free of charge") by commercial platforms has implied a transformation of the very nature of digital space. Suppose the Internet previously provided an inclusive and decentralised access model. In that case, today's commercial platforms represent closed and private spaces, where the conditions of participation and methods of interaction are determined unilaterally by platform managers. In this regard, the concept of "walled gardens" (Paterson, 2012) has been used to describe closed ecosystems, such as those of *Google*, *Apple*, or *Amazon*, in which user information and data are kept within the system, limiting external access and strengthening centralised control over data flows.

The governance model that regulated the Internet in its first decades of existence was based on the possibility of open participation by anyone with technical skills, good ideas, and the time to dedicate (Amoretti, 2009). On the contrary, the technical choices and commercial strategies of the platforms are made exclusively and unilaterally by the board of directors and in the interests of the shareholders.

The growing centrality of platforms in managing social interactions, which has not stopped with the overcoming of the pandemic, poses crucial challenges for the public sphere and democratic discussion. The use of algorithms to moderate and filter content can create "bubbles" that reinforce users! pre-existing beliefs, reducing the diversity of opinions and fragmenting public discussion (Pariser, 2011). The transformation of digital space from a public arena to an environment of private control raises questions about how to balance the opportunities offered by undoubtedly convenient and sophisticated technologies with the need to preserve an open and transparent space for discussion and debate (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

More generally, it is about balancing the legitimate private interests of investors and shareholders with the public values that are increasingly affirmed or denied through the services made available by platforms. It is essential to note that these services now extend beyond our online activities to encompass every aspect of daily life, both online and offline. To cite just one of the many possible examples, let us recall how the taxi service has been regulated so far by the granting of a license that requires compliance with certain rules

to protect the community, such as transparency in rates and the universality of the service. The taxi driver cannot refuse a ride based on the colour of the customer's skin, for example, nor can he raise his fares on rainy days. However, *Uber* drivers are private citizens who travel around cities in their cars. *Uber* itself is not formally a taxi service, but rather a simple intermediary between supply and demand; as such, it is not subject to compliance with any particular guarantee.

Data Colonialism

"Raw data is an oxymoron": "Raw" data does not exist

Platforms feed on data. However, the common perception that data can exist in a pure and unmediated form is somewhat naive. In reality, "raw data is an oxymoron" (Gitelman, 2013): data are never "raw" but are always actively constructed through specific practices of collection, selection and interpretation. This concept is crucial in the contemporary digital world, where data related to individuals' online and offline behaviors is continuously collected, processed and transformed into economic resources by commercial digital platforms. Data collection is not a neutral process; on the contrary, it is intrinsically linked to the business models of the platforms that determine what data is collected and how it is used to maximise profits.

Active data construction implies that any information generated or collected passes through a series of filters and processes that determine its meaning and usefulness. Digital platforms utilise sophisticated algorithms to extract value from user data, transforming everyday actions, such as clicks, views, and interactions, into detailed profiles that can be leveraged for marketing and content personalisation purposes. This process of data construction is therefore an act of interpretation and manipulation that reflects the priorities and objectives of the platforms, rather than an objective representation of reality (Aragona & Felaco, 2019).

The concept of "affordances" as a colonization of social behaviors

The concept of affordances (Gibson, 1979) refers generically to the possibilities for action that an environment or object offers to an individual. In the context of digital platforms, affordances are manifested through the design of platform interfaces and functionalities, which direct and limit user behaviors in specific ways (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Platform affordances, therefore, are not neutral but are designed to guide the user towards certain types of interactions that can be quantified and subsequently exploited economically.

Platform affordances can be seen as forms of "colonisation" of social behaviors, as they shape user actions according to design logics that reflect the commercial priorities of the platforms themselves. For example, the structure

of "like," "share," and "follow" on social media like *Facebook* and *Instagram* incentivises behaviors that increase visibility and engagement. Affordances then guide users to participate in ways that generate valuable data for the platforms, often without users being aware of the implications of these actions. Affordances also determine the boundaries of what *can* and *cannot be* done. For example, *Instagram*'s interface at the time of writing allows you to interact with content by clicking a "like" button, but there is no button to say "dislike." *YouTube* enables both reactions to, but for each piece of content, it only publicly displays the "like" count. Finally, *Facebook* plans to react with a range of very specific emotions (currently seven). In all cases, of course, these are precise choices made unilaterally by designers, following the logic of economic opportunity, which users cannot intervene in. This also ultimately means that platforms do not limit themselves to collecting data ex-post, as if they were natural resources already present in the environment (the rhetoric of data as "new oil" is widespread). Still, they directly construct, orient and direct the actions and behaviors that are then reflected in that data.

This colonisation through affordances has profound implications for the nature of online participation and the quality of social interaction. Platforms design their interfaces to maximise user engagement, creating experiences that promote permanence on the platform and continuous interaction. This approach can lead, among other things, to compulsive behaviors and social media addiction, negatively affecting users' overall well-being and the quality of their social relationships (Fasoli, 2019; Gui, 2014).

The Advent of Generative AI

What is generative AI, and what are its applications?

Within these transformations, generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) represents one of the most significant innovations, poised to enhance further the services offered by digital platforms. Generative AI refers to a category of advanced models and algorithms capable of autonomously creating new content, utilising vast amounts of data to learn complex patterns and generate text, images, videos, and other forms of content.

Among the best-known applications of generative AI are language models, such as GPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer), developed by *OpenAI* and based on an initial learning process that involves the collection and analysis of massive datasets, now made possible by the progressive digitalisation of every aspect of social life. This data includes texts from books, articles, websites and other digital sources, which are used to recognise the syntactic, semantic and stylistic rules of the language. During the training phase, AI models analyse this data to identify recurring patterns and build an internal representation of the language. Once operational, these models can produce coherent and articulated texts on a wide range of topics, simulating a deep understanding

of the linguistic structures and dynamics of the content. For example, they can answer questions, write articles, compose emails, create stories or generate programming code, showing remarkable versatility.

The applications of generative AI are numerous and span various sectors. In virtual assistance, for example, it can be used to improve the interaction between users and customer service systems, providing quick and relevant answers to customer questions. In creative writing, generative AI can support authors and screenwriters in generating ideas and drafting drafts. In academia and journalism, it can help synthesise articles and reports, allowing researchers and journalists to focus on more in-depth analysis.

Additionally, generative AI has applications in machine translation, enhancing the quality and accuracy of translations between different languages. In the field of creating visual and multimedia content, such as images and videos, generative AI is also showing great potential, with algorithms capable of creating original "works of art" (the quotation marks are still required), animations and visual simulations that can be used in various contexts, from entertainment to education.

Between stochastic parrots and black boxes

Alongside the potential of generative AI, there are also significant risks and limitations associated with its use. A first potential problem, perhaps the one that most frequently comes to the forefront of public discussions, concerns the impact on professional skills. The widespread use of generative AI for tasks that require creativity and critical thinking could lead to excessive dependence on technology, reducing opportunities for the exercise of distinctive human skills. This could have negative consequences for the labor market and professional training, as some tasks traditionally performed by humans could be automated, thereby reducing the need for certain skills. However, we must remember that the contents produced by AI are not strictly speaking either "creative" or "intelligent" but rather represent a kind of reshuffling of the information contained in the training datasets, seasoned with an element of randomness that in some cases can be increased or reduced by the user's prompt (an element of randomness that sometimes produces so-called "hallucinations").

In this regard, some critics of generative AI employ the ironic concept of the "stochastic parrot" (Bender et al., 2021) to highlight two main limitations. Like a parrot, AI can mimic human language without truly understanding its meaning: it analyses large amounts of text to recognise linguistic structures. Still, it lacks a deep semantic understanding of them. Second, the word "stochastic" refers to the use of probability and statistics to determine outcomes, selecting subsequent words in a sentence based on probabilities calculated during training, without critical or rational thinking. The content generated by

an AI could therefore be accurate and precise, or it could also be completely wrong or nonsensical; the only way to distinguish between the two is to have some prior personal knowledge of the topic. In other words, these tools can be excellent helpers for those who need to package a specific form (for example, a draft of a summary text) on content they are already familiar with – but they can lead to catastrophic errors for those who use them as a means to learn something new. In this sense, the progressive diffusion of these tools risks creating new forms of social inequality between those who will be able to use them critically and those who will passively suffer their effects (Wang et al., 2024).

By basing a large part of its knowledge base on the most popular discussions, the most mainstream ideas and the most widespread prejudices on the web, AI-generated content also confirms a representation of the world that tends to exclude minorities, identities and non-normative practices (Gillespie, 2024).

There are also ethical concerns about the ownership and use of both the content generated by AI and the information contained in the datasets used to train the models. Since generative AI models utilise data collected from various sources, there are open issues regarding copyright and the appropriation of content. Similar potential risks concern data privacy and security. Models can be trained on personal and sensitive data, which raises questions about how this data is collected, stored and used. Lack of transparency in data collection and use processes can lead to privacy violations and security risks, exposing users to potential abuse and a dystopian surveillance scenario.

However, one of the most significant problems that is perhaps still not discussed enough concerns its nature as a "black box". The concept of "black box" in the sociology of science and technology (Latour, 1999) refers to a process, device, or system whose internal functioning becomes invisible or irrelevant to users once it is accepted and functioning properly. This leads users to trust the results without understanding the internal details, facilitating the adoption of complex technologies. For example, computers and smartphones are used daily without users needing to understand and know their complex internal mechanisms. In the case of generative AI models, the operating details are hidden from users not only because they are enormously complex, but also because they constitute corporate knowledge capital protected by industrial secrecy. Furthermore, the output generated by these tools is subject to constraints and limitations imposed by the designers, who can change unilaterally in response to the prevailing climate of opinion, power relations, the level of public acceptance of the technology, legislative changes, and other factors. For example, if we ask an AI for instructions on how to build a bomb, we will get a polite but firm refusal. Although this seems like a reasonable choice, the problem is that, as users, we are not allowed to know what the limits are on the system: what exactly are we not allowed to discuss, other than building

bombs? And what can be talked about, but only in a certain way? We do not know, and we are not allowed to know.

The opacity of generative AI models means that users must trust that the systems produce accurate, reliable, complete, and unbiased results. But in the absence of public information about the internal workings of these systems, this would essentially mean trusting the companies that produce them. This brings us back to the conflict between public values, which can only be protected by an informed and aware public opinion, and private interests, which remain the legitimate goal of any private company.

Conclusions

The pandemic has led to a sudden and massive migration to online services, accelerating a process that was already underway and that did not slow down once the emergency was over. These services are no longer the result of collaborative work on a global scale as the Internet was in its first thirty years but are instead products developed by private companies with a competitive and commercial perspective. This transformation from the network society to the platform society risks making the ordinary functioning of our daily lives, as both citizens and businesses, organisations, or institutions, dependent on technologies that are undoubtedly convenient, sophisticated, and efficient, but over which we have no control. We cannot know how they work, and we cannot participate in decisions regarding their development directions.

The advent of generative artificial intelligence exacerbates this risk, given the rapid emergence of new tools on the market and the significant improvement in their performance over a short period.

It is therefore urgent to have a public and shared reflection on the concept of digital sovereignty (Couture & Toupin, 2019; Floridi, 2020; Hummel et al., 2021) and on the respect for public values to which large high-tech companies must be held accountable. For this reason, it is necessary, first of all, to realise that the issue is exquisitely political and not technical: it concerns the world in which we want to live and the power relations between governments, civil society, and businesses.

From this point on, the challenge becomes that of balancing the promises of technology with the freedom and autonomy of human beings, which can never cease to be the foundation of any social organisation in which it is desirable to live.

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