

## **The Politics of “Platforms”**

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### **Abstract:**

This essay examines how online content providers such as YouTube are positioning themselves to users, clients, advertisers, and policymakers. One term in particular, “platform,” helps reveal the contours of this discursive work. “Platform” has been deployed by these content providers in both their populist appeals to users and their marketing pitches to advertisers and media providers, not just as technical platforms but as platforms of opportunity. Whatever tensions exist in serving all of these constituencies are elided. The term also fits their efforts to shape information policy, where they seek legislative protection on the basis of facilitating user expression, yet also claim limited liability for what those users say. As these providers increasingly become the curators of public discourse, we must examine the roles they aim to play, and the criteria they set by which they hope to be judged.

### **Keywords:**

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## **The Politics of “Platforms”**

In October 2006, Google purchased YouTube for \$1.65 billion, cementing their dominance in the world of online video. The press release announcing the purchase included quotes from the two proud fathers, trumpeting the symbiosis of their companies’ future partnership:

“The YouTube team has built an exciting and powerful media platform that complements Google's mission to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful,” said Eric Schmidt, Chief Executive Officer of Google. ...“By joining forces with Google, we can benefit from its global reach and technology leadership to deliver a more comprehensive entertainment experience for our users and to create new opportunities for our partners,” said Chad Hurley, CEO and Co-Founder of YouTube. “I’m confident that with this partnership we’ll have the flexibility and resources needed to pursue our goal of building the next-generation platform for serving media worldwide.”<sup>1</sup>

A few months later, YouTube made a slight change to the paragraph it used to describe its service in its press releases. This “website,” “company,” “service,” “forum,” and “community” was now also a “distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small.”<sup>2</sup>

Intermediaries like YouTube and Google – those companies that provide the storage, navigation, and delivery of the digital content of others – are working to establish a long-term position in a fluctuating economic and cultural terrain. Like publishers, television networks, and film studios before them, companies with an early presence are trying to protect their dominance

in the market, while in the shadow of these behemoths, smaller firms are working also to anticipate trends in the business of information delivery and shore up their niche positions in them.

To whatever extent these intermediaries secure a prominent role in the distribution of information online, they find themselves subject to the rules that govern public discourse. YouTube's dominance in the world of online video makes them one of just a handful of firms that are now the primary keepers of the cultural discussion as it moves to the Internet. As such, again like the television networks and trade publishers before them, they are increasingly facing questions regarding their responsibilities: to their users, to key constituencies who depend on the public discourse they host, and to broader notions of the public interest. As particular video platforms, search engines, blogging tools, and interactive online spaces become established entities whose corporate decisions have cultural ramifications, regulatory agencies and legislators concerned with the movement of information and the health of the public discourse are turning their attention to them. Particular disputes spur bursts of rulemaking that establish protections and obligations for content intermediaries and, in the process, draw normative and discursive boundaries around them that tend to freeze their public role.

In the context of these financial, cultural, and regulatory demands, these firms work not just politically but also discursively to frame their services and technologies. They do so strategically, to position themselves best both to pursue current and future profits, and to strike a regulatory sweet spot between legislative protection that benefits them and limits to legal liabilities that do not. In this essay I will highlight the discursive work that prominent digital intermediaries, especially YouTube, are undertaking, by focusing on one particular term of art: "platform."

The term “platform” has emerged recently as an increasingly familiar term in the description of the online services of content intermediaries, both in their self-characterizations and in the more public discourse of users, the press, and commentators. There has been a proliferation of video “platforms,” both the visible ones whose names are known to users, such as YouTube, Veoh, Revver, MTV’s Flux, and Kaltura, to the invisible platforms that are known only to commercial producers looking to stream their content, such as Brightcove, Castfire, Real Media’s “Helix Media Delivery Platform,” and Comcast’s thePlatform service. These join the blogging platforms, photo sharing platforms, and deliberation platforms now jostling for attention on the new web. The point is not the word itself; “platform” merely helps reveal the position that these intermediaries are trying to establish, and the difficulty of doing so. YouTube must present its service not only to its users, but to advertisers, to major media producers it hopes to have as partners, and to policymakers. The term “platform” helps reveal how YouTube and others stage themselves for these constituencies, allowing them to make a broadly progressive sales pitch while also eliding the tensions inherent in their service: between user-generated and commercially produced content, between cultivating community and serving up advertising, between intervening in the delivery of content and remaining neutral. In the process, it is offering up a trope by which others will come to understand and judge them, and one that arguably misrepresents the exact role YouTube and other intermediaries really play in the movement of digital culture.

## **Platform**

This discursive positioning depends on terms and ideas that are both specific enough to

mean something, and vague enough to work in multiple venues for multiple audiences. To call one's online service a "platform" is not a meaningless term, and it is not a term with one simple meaning. Like other structural metaphors (think "network," "broadcast," or "channel") the term depends on a semantic richness that, though it may go unnoticed by the casual listener, gives the term discursive resonance. I want to begin by highlighting four semantic territories that the word "platform" has signified in the past, as its emergence as a descriptive term for digital intermediaries depends on all four.

### *computational*

In a technical context like this, the use of the term "platform" certainly harkens back specifically to its computational meaning: an infrastructure that supports the design and use of particular applications, be it computer hardware, operating systems, gaming devices, mobile devices, and digital disc formats.<sup>3</sup> There were the "platform wars" of the 1980s, between PC and Mac; we've since witnessed platform wars between competing search engines Google and Yahoo, competing social networks Facebook and MySpace, competing mobile phone environments Apple iPhone and Google Android. The term has also been used to describe online environments that allow users to design and deploy applications they design or that are offered by third parties – an example is Facebook, which in 2007 made public its API (application programming interface) to allow third parties design PHP or Javascript widgets that users can incorporate into their profiles.<sup>4</sup>

### *architectural*

The computational meaning is itself relatively new, and just one facet of a term that has a much richer range of uses and connotations. The Oxford English Dictionary notes 15 different sub-meanings in three broad categories, the last of which is the computational one being

referenced by Microsoft and Facebook. The first and oldest is architectural: “A raised level surface on which people or things can stand, usually a discrete structure intended for a particular activity or operation.”<sup>5</sup> In this sense “platform” has been broadly used to describe human-built or naturally-formed physical structures, be they generic or dedicated to one of a variety of specific uses: subway and train platforms, Olympic diving platforms, deep-sea oil rig platforms, platform shoes. This meaning is most directly connected to the etymological origins of the word itself: in its earliest appearances, the word appeared as two, “platte fourme” or a variation thereof, a clear emphasis on physical shape.

### *figurative*

From this, the term developed a more conceptual usage, as “the ground, foundation, or basis *of* an action, event, calculation, condition, etc. Now also: a position achieved or situation brought about which forms the basis for further achievement.” Thus we might describe our entry-level position as a “platform” for climbing the corporate ladder, and Emerson can complain that “conversation in society is found to be on a platform so low as to exclude science, the saint, and the poet.”<sup>6</sup> The material platform for physical industry becomes a metaphysical one for opportunity, action, and insight.

### *political*

Though we now refer to the issues a political candidate or party endorses as their “platform,” the term did first emerge from the more material definition, referring initially to the actual stage constructed for a candidate to address an audience of supporters, from which they would articulate their political beliefs. (Hence the International Platform Association, formed by Daniel Webster and Josiah Holbrook in 1831, to celebrate the art of oration.) The term drifted from the material structure to the beliefs being articulated. Puritan ministers in colonial New

England could issue their statement on the governance of the church as “The Cambridge Platform”<sup>7</sup> in 1648; in 2008, the U.S. Democratic and Republican parties can support their respective presidential candidates by publishing their party platforms – for the Republicans, “a platform of enduring principle, not passing convenience”.<sup>8</sup> We still sometimes refer individual political positions as “planks,” or ask where a candidate “stands” on an issue, subtle reminders of the term’s legacy. Curiously, a term that generally implied a kind of neutrality towards use – platforms are typically flat, featureless, open to all – in this instance specifically carries a political valence, where a position must be taken.

All four of these semantic areas (architectural, figurative, political, and computational) are relevant as we consider why “platform” has emerged in reference to online content-hosting intermediaries, and just as importantly, what value both its specificity and its flexibility offer them. All point to a common set of connotations: a “raised, level surface” designed to facilitate some activity that will subsequently take place. It is anticipatory, but not causal. A neutrality with regards to the activity is implied, though less so as the term gets specifically matched to specific functions (like a subway platform), and even less so in the political variation. When it comes to the technical or software architecture of a computing platform, this implied neutrality is central but contested: a platform can be agnostic about what you might want to do with it, but in some economic models either neutral (“cross-platform”) or very much not neutral (“platform-dependent”) to which provider’s application you’d like to use.

Drawing these meanings together, “platform” emerges not simply as indicating a functional shape: it suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, lifting up those who stand upon it. Even the architectural version suggests gaining an aesthetic or useful vantage point: “*Platform*, in Architecture, is... a kind of Terrass Walk, or even Floor on the Top of the

Building; from whence we may take a fair Prospect of the adjacent Gardens or Fields.”<sup>9</sup> Subway platforms allow riders to step directly the train, instead of loitering below among the dangerous rails. But platform is defined not just by height, but also by its level surface and its openness to those hoping to stand upon it. Even in its political context, where the platform by definition raises someone above the rest, and is used to describe the beliefs of candidates and parties but rarely of citizens, the term retains a populist ethos, of a representative speaking plainly and forcefully to his constituents. In any of the terms’ applications, being raised, level, and accessible are ideological features as much as physical ones.

In an attempt to succinctly define another term he had helped coin, Tim O’Reilly, whose business seems to be as much discursive as anything else, proclaimed that “Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all the connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform...”<sup>10</sup> In classic O’Reilly style, he draws a term from the computational lexicon, loosens it from the specific technical meaning, and layers onto it both a cyber-political sense of liberty and an info-business taste of opportunity. This discursive move is not without its detractors. It’s not clear whether Marc Andreessen had the O’Reillys or the YouTubes of the world in mind, when in a blog post he tried to tie the word back to its computational specifics:

platform is turning into a central theme of our industry and one that a lot of people want to think about and talk about. However, the concept of “platform” is also the focus of a swirling vortex of confusion... whenever anyone uses the word “platform,” ask “can it be programmed?” Specifically with software code provided by the user? If not, it’s not a platform, and you can safely ignore

whoever's talking – which means you can safely ignore 80%+ of the people in the world today who are using the word “platform” and don't know what it means.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, despite Andreessen's concerns, the broader meaning of “platform” is finding purchase. It now makes rhetorical sense to use the term to describe a computational service, but detach it from the idea of further software programming. Just as two examples, a recent Pew report cataloguing types of ICT users noted that “The advent of Web 2.0 – the ability of people to use a range of information and communication technology as a platform to express themselves online and participate in the commons of cyberspace – is often heralded as the next phase of the information society.”<sup>12</sup> Platforms are platforms not necessarily because they allow code to be written or run, but because they afford an opportunity to communicate, interact, or sell.

Describing News Corp's purchase of MySpace in the pages of *Wired*, VP Jeremy Philips found the term useful, as did the reporter:

“News Corp.'s traditional media business has two legs: content and distribution,” he says. Then he sketches a circle in between. “That's where MySpace fits. It's neither one nor the other, though it shares aspects of both. It's a media platform, and a very powerful and adaptable one. Which is why it has such enormous potential.” ...With enough people, it just might be the ticket to selling media in a world where audiences, not corporations, call the shots. How? Think of MySpace as an 80 million-screen multiplex where YouTube videos are always showing. Or an infinite radio dial where the DJs spin only the records they want to play. There may not be a working band or musician left in the English-speaking world who doesn't have a MySpace profile. Ditto comedians, artists, photographers, and anyone else trying to catch the public eye. Why is Disney promoting *Pirates of the*

Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest on a News Corp. site? Because that's where the viewers are. And that's what a platform is: the place you have to be.<sup>13</sup>

### **Users, Advertisers, Clients**

It is these connotations – not just functional support for activity but an open, neutral, egalitarian, and progressive one – that have made this term so compelling for intermediaries like YouTube as a way to appeal to users, especially in contrast to their traditional mass media counterparts. YouTube and its competitors claim to empower the individual to speak – lifting us all up, evenly. YouTube can proclaim that it is "committed to offering the best user experience and the best platform for people to share their videos around the world"<sup>14</sup> and offer up its You Choose '08 project as a "platform for people to engage in dialogue with candidates and each other through the use of community features such as video responses, text comments and ratings."<sup>15</sup> Andreessen's remarks notwithstanding, this is not the strict computational meaning. This more conceptual use of "platform" leans on all of the term's connotations: computational, something to build upon and innovate from; political, a place from which to speak and be heard; figurative, in that the opportunity is an abstract promise as much as a practical one; and architectural, in that the open, flat, and raised structure that is YouTube suggests an open-armed, egalitarian facilitation of expression, not an elitist gatekeeper with normative and technical rules built in.<sup>16</sup> This fits neatly with the long-standing rhetoric about the democratizing potential of the Internet. And it very much aligns with the more recent enthusiasm for user-generated content (UGC), amateur expertise, popular creativity, peer-level social networking, and robust public commentary. (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Burgess, 2007; Jenkins, 2006)

Of course these activities, as well as services that host them, predate YouTube. But YouTube has been particularly effective at positioning itself as the upstart champion of user-generated content. The site launched amidst an recalcitrant back-and-forth, in the market and the courts, about how (or whether) film and television could migrate online – pitting clumsy industry attempts at launching oversized, restrictive subscription sites against upstart online services aiming to host independent filmmaking, all amidst the rapid expansion of peer-to-peer networks increasingly allowing users to share Hollywood films and network programming, along with the already vast trading of major label music. (AUTHOR, 2007) As the opportunity for circulating user-generated content grew, and was recognized as a cultural phenomenon (or was packaged as such), YouTube quickly surpassed its rivals: one time competitor Google video, iFilm (now Spike), and Revver.

The promise of sites like YouTube, one that of course exceeds but nevertheless found purchase in a term like “platform,” is primarily focused on ordinary users. The “You” in YouTube is the most obvious signal of this, and has itself found broader cultural purchase,<sup>17</sup> but the direct appeal to the amateur user is visible elsewhere. YouTube offers to let you “Broadcast Yourself,” or as they put it in its “Company History” page, “as more people capture special moments on video, YouTube is empowering them to become the broadcasters of tomorrow.”<sup>18</sup> They celebrate videos that go “viral,” claiming that their popularity is more genuine because it was not manufactured or pushed by its producer or a mega-industry, but instead selected from among millions and made into a phenomenon.

This offer of access to everyone comes fitted with an often implicit, occasionally explicit, counterpoint: that such services are therefore unlike the mainstream broadcasters, film studios, and publishers. Unlike Hollywood and the television networks, who could be painted as the big

bad industry, online content seems an open world, where anyone can post, anything can be said. YouTube was distinctly not going to play the role of gatekeeper, not even curators: they would be mere facilitators, supporters, hosts.

But of course, YouTube's aspirations are somewhat greater than being repository for America's funniest home videos. First and foremost, they are looking to profit from it. It is important to remember that YouTube is funded almost entirely by advertising. (Allen, 2008) This is certainly downplayed in the specific appeal to regular users, especially to the extent that commercial advertising is not a neat ideological fit with the ethos of the participatory web – not to mention that, at the start, the users generating the content did not generate any revenue for themselves in this process. (Cammaerts, 2008; Petersen, 2008; Terranova, 2000; Terranova, 2004)<sup>19</sup>

YouTube has yet to turn a profit based on its advertising model, and it was clear to its founders that mere banner ads on the site would be wholly insufficient. From very early on, YouTube has aggressively sought strategic partnerships with an array of professional media companies, to include commercial media content alongside its user-generated submissions. It is easy to overlook this. In fact, a careful look at the variety of YouTube content reveals a complex array of kinds of media: in terms of who is producing it (amateur vs. independent artist vs. small production venues vs. majors vs. signed artists posting on their own vs. professionals who are not traditional media creators, such as educators), why they produced it (for YouTube vs. for other distribution platforms as well vs. for other reasons, where adding it to YouTube is an afterthought), why they posted it (acclaim and reputation, financial gain, self-promotion, joining a community, already part of a community), and how that work fits with their broader efforts (part of their job, distinct from their job, backstage to their job, as promotion for their other

services).

Certainly, there is revenue to be had for including or featuring a major studio or record label content among all this. Although commercial media is still a minority of YouTube's total content, it dominates the lists of most popular and most viewed, particularly music videos from major label artists. More than that, most of YouTube's user-generated content cannot, for the most part, be paired with advertising. Currently YouTube only inserts pre-roll or overlay ads into videos from commercial partners; advertisers are often wary of pairing even banner ads with user-generated videos, out of fear of being associated with the wrong content; and, YouTube doesn't want to undercut its defense against copyright complaints by inadvertently profiting from infringing material posted by a user. Recent estimates suggest that YouTube can only pair ads with 4% of its content.<sup>20</sup> There is also legal advantage to be had from such media partnerships: signs of their continued pro-business cooperation with the majors has gone a little way in helping undercut the current lawsuit against them by Viacom.

The business of being a cultural intermediary is a complex and fragile one, oriented as it is to at least three constituencies: end users, advertisers, and professional content producers. This is where the discursive work being accomplished is most vital. Intermediaries like YouTube must present themselves strategically to each of these audiences, carve out a role and a set of expectations that is acceptable to each and also serves their own financial interests, while resolving or at least eliding the contradictions between them.

Curiously, tropes like "platform" seem to work across these discourses – in fact, this may be the real value of this term, that it brings these discourses into alignment without them unsettling each other. Using the same terminology they employ to appeal to amateur users, YouTube sells its service to advertisers: "Marketers have embraced the YouTube marketing

platform and [sic] as an innovative and engaging vehicle for connecting with their target audiences, and they are increasing sales and exposure for their companies and brands in many different ways.<sup>21</sup> Platform in its more figurative sense also works as well for media partners.

YouTube can promise all of the following, under the rubric of the “platform”:

“YouTube provides a great platform for independent filmmakers to build and grow a global audience for their short films and video projects.”<sup>22</sup>

YouTube is a platform for promotional as well as educational videos, and we are honored to partner with PBS as they bring their unique video programming to our 21st century community.”<sup>23</sup>

We look forward to partnering with them [Warner Music Group] to offer this powerful distribution platform to our artists and their fans.”<sup>24</sup>

This is not the “means of expression” promise YouTube makes to users, nor is it the computational meaning.<sup>25</sup> Rather, it is a figurative “platform” of opportunity – nearly the political connotation of the term, though evacuated of actual politics. In this case, it is a distinctly commercial opportunity: when YouTube added “click-to-buy” links to retailers like Amazon and iTunes alongside certain videos, a post to the company blog noted that “This is just the beginning of building a broad, viable eCommerce platform for users and partners on YouTube.”<sup>26</sup> This is increasingly, perhaps always was, a platform from which to sell, not just to speak.

As a web-based host of content with a visible brand presence for users, YouTube may in fact be the exception in the world of online video. Many more intermediaries, rather than setting up sites of their own, instead provide the less visible back-end for streaming video that appears to come directly from the artists, producers, studios, or broadcasters. These intermediaries, then, rarely need to speak to users; their rhetorical efforts are entirely to their business clients,

typically media producers and advertisers. This business-to-business discourse generally prefers terms like “solution,” “service,” “infrastructure” or “experience.” Yet even here, and perhaps even more plainly, “platform” offers a powerful way to convince advertisers to use them to reach consumers;

Adap.tv OneSource is the first open and universal online video ad platform.

Maximize your revenue from all major ad sources and all ad formats. Our platform delivers access to all major ad networks, the ability to add your own ads, and the world's best optimization, which means more money for you.<sup>27</sup>

Brightcove, the current market leader among video streaming services,<sup>28</sup> introduced BrightcoveTV in 2006, designed to compete with YouTube for user-generated content, but quietly stopped supporting it after a year, and shut it down entirely a year later.<sup>29</sup> Now Brightcove is exclusively

an Internet TV platform. We're dedicated to harnessing the inherent power of the Internet to transform the distribution and consumption of media. Brightcove empowers content owners – from independent producers to major broadcast networks – to reach their audiences directly through the Internet. At the same time, we help web publishers enrich their sites with syndicated video programming, and we give marketers more ways to communicate and engage with their consumers.<sup>30</sup>

Intermediaries must speak in different registers to their relevant constituencies, positioning themselves so as to best suit their interests in each moment. (Gieryn, 1999) However, “platform” unproblematically moves across all three registers, linking them into a single agenda. For advertisers, YouTube can promise to be a terrain upon which they can build brand

awareness, a public campaign, a product launch; for major media producers, it offers a venue in which their content can be raised up and made visible and, even better, pushed to audiences. At the same time, the evocative rhetoric of "you" and user-generated content fits neatly, implying a sense of egalitarianism and support, and in some ways even in the political sense, i.e. giving people a public voice. (Couldry, 2008) The term offers a seamless link between the discursive registers in which YouTube must speak, even in the same breath:

Ultimately, the online video experience is about empowerment. Consumers of online video are empowered to be their own content programmers, consuming the relevant mix of mass, niche and personal media they demand. Advertisers are empowered through data to better understand and engage with their audiences.

And content owners are empowered, through sophisticated identification tools, to control their content and make smart business decisions with their content.<sup>31</sup>

Still, "platform" (and more broadly the offer it represents) elides a series of structural tensions. Hosting user-generated content and "empowering" individuals depends on an ad-based business model where these users are being sold to advertisers. Hardly the featureless, open, level playing field implied by YouTube's appeals to their users, the paying partners enjoy a featured place in the real estate of the front page, fully designed mini-sites within YouTube, and sweetened advertising deals.

To an audience of content providers, CEO Chad Hurley went so far as to suggest that YouTube is the new television, retrofitting the term platform to seal the analogy:

A small group of innovators introduce a new technology that has the ability to entertain and engage people on a massive scale. Advertisers willing to risk money on this untested platform are hard to come by. Content owners are reluctant to

embrace it for fear of alienating their existing audiences. And experts hail this new platform as signaling the demise of another. As some of you may have guessed, this is not only the story of YouTube. The year is 1941, nearly 70 years ago, and CBS has just launched its new television network amidst cries that it means the death of radio.<sup>32</sup>

This is where a term like "platform," and the connotations it currently carries with it, is so useful. YouTube and others can make a bid to be the new television, convincing media producers to provide their valuable content and advertisers to buy valuable consumer attention, on the back of user-generated content and all its democratic, egalitarian connotations, offered to them as television's antidote.

## **Policy**

Maybe it's too easy to find such overly broad and idyllic promises when looking at of the rhetoric of advertising and promotion. Advertising is rife with optimistic overstatement, designed to be all things to all people. Of course, not every term or idea resonates with people and seeps into the public discourse. That the term platform, for describing services like YouTube, has moved beyond their own hyperbolic efforts and into common parlance, does suggest that the idea strikes some people as compelling. But the way in which an information distribution arrangement is characterized discursively can matter much more, beyond it merely fitting the necessary sales pitch or taking hold as part of the public vernacular. These terms and claims get further established, reified, and enforced as they are taken up and given legitimacy inside authoritative discourses such as law, policy, and jurisprudence.

As society looks to regulate an emerging form of information distribution, be it the telegraph or the radio or the Internet, it is in many ways making decisions about what that technology is, what it is for, what sociotechnical arrangements are best suited to help it achieve that, and what it must not be allowed to become. (Benkler, 2003; Lyman, 2004; Starr, 2004) This is a semantic debate as much as anything else: what we call such things, what precedents we see as most analogous, and how we characterize its technical workings drives how we set conditions for it – as Streeter (1996) put it,

if people describe television alternately as an artwork or a commodity, in the right circumstances their talk can help shape it. The FCC chair who described television as a toaster with pictures, for example, did so as part of a successful effort to change the way television is regulated, which in turn noticeably changed the medium. (7)

This is not just in the discourse of the rulemakers. Interested third parties, particularly the companies that provide these services, are deeply invested in fostering a regulatory paradigm that gives them the most leeway to conduct their business, imposes the fewest restrictions on their service provision, protects them from liability for things they hope not to be liable for, and paints them in the best light in terms of the public interest. As Galperin (2004) argued,

Ideological paradigms... do not emerge *ex nihilo*, nor do they diffuse automatically. There must be vehicles for the creation and transmission of ideas. Several organizations perform this function, among them universities, think tanks, trade groups, companies, government agencies, advocacy groups, and so on. For any policy issue at stake there is no lack of competing paradigms to choose from.

(161)

YouTube's parent company Google, in its newly adopted role of aggressive lobbyist,<sup>33</sup> has become increasingly vocal on a number of policy issues, including Net neutrality, spectrum allocation, freedom of speech, and political transparency. Sometimes, their aim is to highlight the role of some Google service as crucial to the unfettered circulation of information – whether to justify further regulation, or none at all, depends on the issue. In other moments, they are working to downplay their role, as merely an intermediary, to limit their liability for their users' activity. (This is hardly unfamiliar in the regulatory agendas of traditional media distributors: Hollywood studios will demand of Congress stronger copyright laws or trade protections at one hearing, then request that they remain hands-off of the rating of content, proclaiming the value of deregulation, at the next.)

In this effort to inhabit the middle, rewarded for facilitating expression but not liable for its excesses, the company has deployed the term platform as part of its legislative strategy. For example, Google has been vigorously supporting the “Net neutrality” effort, calling for Congressional legislation to forbid price differentiation by broadband providers. In their policy blog, they praised a bill to that effect introduced in the House in February 2008, saying that “The bill would affirm that the Internet should remain an open platform for innovation, competition, and social discourse, free from unreasonable discriminatory practices by network operators.”<sup>34</sup> Notice not only the use of platform, here (as with O'Reilly) referring to the entire Internet, but also the kinds of beneficial “applications” it can host: technical, economic, and cultural. As with YouTube's careful address to partners, advertisers, and users, these three aims are held together by the role Google imagines for itself as a provider of information, eliding any possible tensions between them.

Google and YouTube have also positioned themselves as champions of freedom of

expression, and platform works here too, deftly linking the technical, figurative, and political. In response to a request from Senator Joe Lieberman to remove a number of videos he claimed were Islamist training propaganda (a request they partially honored), the YouTube team asserted,

While we respect and understand his views, YouTube encourages free speech and defends everyone's right to express unpopular points of view. We believe that YouTube is a richer and more relevant platform for users precisely because it hosts a diverse range of views, and rather than stifle debate we allow our users to view all acceptable content and make up their own minds.<sup>35</sup>

In other moments, calling their service a platform can be a way not to trumpet their role, but to minimize it. Online content providers who do not produce their own information have long sought to enjoy limited liability for that information, especially as the liabilities in question have expanded from sordid activities like child pornography and insider trading to the much more widespread activity of music and movie piracy. In the effort to limit their liability not only from these legal charges but also more broadly the cultural charges of being puerile, frivolous, debased, etc., intermediaries like YouTube need to position themselves as just hosting -- empowering all by choosing none.

Throughout the history of media and information policy, debates about emerging technologies and information intermediaries have been marked by key structural/spatial metaphors around which regulation has been organized.<sup>36</sup> (Horwitz, 1989) The most obvious is the baseline premise for how U.S. law thinks about the telephone system. The telephone companies have been bound by two obligations: first, they must act as a common carrier, agreeing to provide service to the entire public without discrimination. Second, they can avoid

liability for the information activities of their users, to the extent that they serve as conduit, rather than as producers of content themselves.

Both metaphors, common carrier and conduit, make a similar (but not identical) semantic claim as does platform. Both suggest that the role of distributing information is a neutral one, where the function is merely the passage of any and all content without discrimination. Unlike platform, there is the implied direction in these terms: bringing information from someone to somewhere. In the age of the “network,” another spatial metaphor that does a great deal of discursive work in contemporary information policy debates, an emphasis on total connectivity has supplanted direction as the key spatial emphasis. But, to the extent that all of these terms figure into such discussions as a means to claim limited liability for the information provided, they are similar tactics in pursuing specific regulatory frameworks. (Sandvig, 2006)

The battle over the telephone system and its social, political, and economic obligations was marked by (if not wholly determined by) a discursive distinction between content and conduit; to the extent that a telephone company could establish its normative role as “common carrier” it enjoyed certain legal protections and subsidies. This term, and more importantly the commonsense meanings it encapsulated, shaped not only telephony, but later policy debates about whether Internet service providers could be regulated according to the same framework. These discursive contests have both immediate impact and lasting consequence. Internet service providers sought to enjoy the “conduit” protections enjoyed by the telephone companies when they pursued Section 230 of the Communication Decency Act.<sup>37</sup> With the passage of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act,<sup>38</sup> a “limited liability” was established for both ISPs and search engines: so long as you are a neutral distributor of information and are not aware of specific violations, you are not liable for the violations of users; if made aware of a violation, you must

make reasonable efforts to intervene.

This limited liability has set the stage for the current lawsuit against YouTube brought by Viacom and others. Viacom asserts not that YouTube engages in copyright infringement (like an individual file-trader) or facilitates copyright infringement (*a la* Napster), but that it does not diligently enough respond to the takedown notices sent to them by the content companies, and enjoys a financial benefit from all the infringement that slips through. Viacom, of course, is careful to work against this metaphoric characterization; in their court documents, they typically refer to YouTube as a “distributor.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, Viacom appealed to the courts to compel YouTube to hand over the activity of its own employees on the site.<sup>40</sup> Secondary copyright liability requires knowledge of the infringement; if records demonstrated that employees themselves were posting infringing copies of Viacom works, this would go a long way towards countering YouTube’s assertion that there’s simply too much content for them to oversee. But it would also work against the “conduit” kinds of protection: the implication would be that YouTube, via some of its employees, were actually seeding the site with studio materials, to make the site more appealing to users – YouTube as distributor, not just platform.

The idea of the platform, then, does quadruple duty here. It fits neatly with the egalitarian and populist appeal to ordinary users and grassroots creativity, offering all of us a “raised, level surface” that, in doing so, will level the playing field. It positions itself as host and facilitator, but one that does not pick favorites, and one with no ulterior motive other than to make room for this tidal wave of user-generated content. This obscures the fact that, of course, YouTube must make a profit. And to do so, YouTube and Google have pursued a specific business model that, while it does not force them to emulate the traditional editor / gatekeeper role of broadcasters, studios, and publishers, nevertheless does have consequences for what they host, how they organize and

present it, and what they need from it. Yet the idea of the platform not only elides the important role of advertisers and mass media producers, it serves as a key term in seeking those businesses and making plain how YouTube can be a platform for their content too. Whatever possible tension there is between being a platform for empowering individual users *and* being a robust marketing platform *and* being a platform for major studio content is elided in the versatility of the term and the powerful appeal of the notion behind it. And, when it comes to avoiding liability for whatever copyright infringing clip or pornography or obscenity that users choose to post, the term becomes a valuable and persuasive token in legal environments, positing their service in a familiar metaphoric framework – merely the neutral provision of content, a vehicle for art rather than its producer or patron – and liability should fall to the users themselves.

## **Conclusion**

A term like “platform” does not drop from the sky, or emerge in some organic, unfettered way from the public discussion. It is drawn from the available cultural vocabulary by stakeholders with specific aims, and carefully massaged so as to have particular resonance for particular audiences inside of particular discourses. These are efforts not only to sell, convince, persuade, protect, triumph, or condemn, but to negotiate what these technologies are, what they are not, how they should be understood, what can be expected of them – in other words, to establish the very criteria by which these technologies will be understood and judged, built directly into the terms by which we know them. The degree to which these terms take root in the popular imagination, in the rhetoric of the industry, or in the vocabulary of the law, is partly the result of this discursive work. (Berland, 2000; AUTHOR, 2006; Pfaffenberger, 1992)

Such terms, and the discursive efforts they represent, matter. First, they are tactics in a

discursive contest to shape and domesticate new media (Silverstone, 1994). This contest is as important to the future of the Internet and digital culture as the market contest to push successful commodities or defend business models, or the legal contest to extend or limit liability for particular uses of these media. The discursive battle is diffuse but hard fought, for the reward is clear: to frame new media in ways that either triumph a particular version, or make it difficult to even see an alternative. Second, a term can only matter in this contest if it resonates beyond those who find it strategically valuable. The terms that do circulate, then, are revealing also of their historical moment. (Boddy, 2003) For better or worse, the sticking power of a term like “cyberspace” or “web 2.0” or “social network” is significant, beyond what they claim to describe. Finally, these terms not only shape the debate, they can shape the technologies being debated. As a term settles into those discourses that themselves have consequences, it can calcify into accepted understandings not only of the medium, but of how it should be organized, sold, and regulated. Further innovations will be oriented towards an idea of what that technology is, and regulation that sees the technology in those terms will demand it act accordingly. (Benkler, 2003)

There are broader questions that must be asked about contemporary new media, that I hope an attention to this discursive work can open. What new roles for culture providers are being imagined, proposed, and established? What kinds of economic and legal rights and obligations are being accepted? What norms and assumptions are they being fitted with? To the extent that those who distribute information and culture powerfully shape who gets to speak, how they are heard, how their contributions are valued, and what is protected or censored, the process by which we determine what these intermediaries are and what they can and cannot do matters immensely for cultural participation, expression, and innovation.

The platforms these intermediaries provide have distinct affordances, designed to serve particular clients and purposes. As profit-seeking entities, they come fitted with business models that impose their own pressures. These drive decisions about content, availability, organization, and participation. (van Dijck, 2009) But these intermediaries are also discursively building, for users, clients, advertisers, and policymakers, their conceptual shape, offering seductive metaphors they hope will drive use and guide regulation, in ways that support their economic aims. This work, of building both the sociotechnical apparatus and the discursive framework by which it may be judged, requires analysis to reveal what is being assumed and what is being overlooked. (Carlson, 1992)

The ideas that “platform” implies – openness, access, opportunity, egalitarianism, neutrality – are the same ideas being promised by digital intermediaries, even when this term does not appear. But they also mask some less than appealing realities: first and foremost, the opportunity for censorship – perhaps its inevitability. There are all kinds of user-provided video that never make it to, or get quickly removed from YouTube. Not surprisingly, the controversial cases tend to fall into the classic categories of speech that have long troubled the edges of First Amendment concerns of the past: pornography and obscenity, political speech, incitement to violence, appropriative re-use of copyright works, content for and about children.<sup>41</sup> In December 2008, for example, YouTube announced (in a blog entry titled “A YouTube for All of Us”) that it would be strengthening its limits on sexual content and profanity. Interestingly, this restriction would not only come in the form of removal of some videos and age restrictions for others, but technical “demotions”: “Videos that are considered sexually suggestive, or that contain profanity, will be algorithmically demoted on our 'Most Viewed,' 'Top Favorited,' and other browse pages.”<sup>42</sup> That YouTube can change the rules of the game, after millions of users have

already settled there, and can bury these rules inside the mechanisms by which users know what is available and popular, is suggestive of the kinds of free speech dilemmas we are likely to face in a digital future, and that we have few precedents for.

But even beyond direct and indirect censorship is a more subtle risk: that underneath these seemingly open, neutral, egalitarian platforms, are mundane technical and economic decisions that quietly constrain, guide, and structure the contours of the public discourse they host.<sup>43</sup> Burgess and Green (2008) suggest that YouTube acts offers “patronage” for user expression: “YouTube Inc can be seen as the ‘patron’ of collective creativity, inviting the participation of a very wide range of content creators, and in so doing controlling at least some of the conditions under which creative content is produced.” These conditions are a combination of practical, economic, and legal, and they stray very far from the hands-off neutrality suggested by their rhetoric. Conditions are unavoidable; its merely a question of what kind of conditions, and with what consequence. As Sandvig (2007) put it, in regard to “Net neutrality” but just as applicable to platform design,

“On the inevitably discriminatory, biased, toll-booth ridden Internet that already exists in 2006, the issue is not neutrality. Instead, it is who discriminates for what purpose, and whether this discrimination is hidden or visible. To reason meaningfully about the present and future of the Internet, we need not neutrality, but a normative vision of what public duties the Internet is meant to serve.” (136)

As these information services become the dominant providers of public culture, we will need to ask how well they perform the task of curating a vibrant, free debate. How do they handle the inevitable tension -- between being agnostic providers of undifferentiated bits and being selective editors of that cultural and political expression -- when the pressure to intervene inevitably

arises, or their economic interests pulls them toward competing priorities? What kinds of exclusion mark the outer boundary of this new openness? How is the offer of access to all content undermined by the bottom line imperative to serve up some content before others? What persistent forms of professional media production will colonize this space purportedly dedicated to the work of amateurs? From this apparent archive, what is preserved and what is discarded, what lasts and what disappears? In other words, what is the shape, and what are the edges, of the platform?

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<sup>2</sup> YouTube, Inc., "YouTube Seeks the Best Shorts on the Internet," May 21, 2007. [http://pl.youtube.com/press\\_room\\_entry?entry=9NWjQEETBc](http://pl.youtube.com/press_room_entry?entry=9NWjQEETBc)

<sup>3</sup> A precursor to this computational meaning, with a slightly different connotation, is its use in the manufacture of automobiles, where the same underlying structure can serve two different cars.

<sup>4</sup> Facebook, Inc., "Build Social Applications on Facebook Platform," <http://developers.facebook.com/>. See Michael Arrington, "Facebook Launches Facebook Platform; They are the Anti-MySpace," *TechCrunch* May 24, 2007, <http://www.techcrunch.com/2007/05/24/facebook-launches-facebook-platform-they-are-the-anti-myspace/>

<sup>5</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, "Platform, n. and adj." Draft revision, June 2006, <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50181067>

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<sup>8</sup> "The 2008 Democratic National Platform: Renewing America's Promise," <http://www.democrats.org/a/party/platform.html>; "2008 Republican Platform," <http://www.gopplatform2008.com/>

<sup>9</sup> John Harris, *Lexicon Technicum* I, 1704, cited in the Oxford English Dictionary, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Tim O'Reilly, "Web 2.0: Compact Definition?" October 1, 2005. <http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2005/10/web-20-compact-definition.html>

<sup>11</sup> Marc Andreessen, "The Three Kinds of Platforms You Meet on the Internet," September 16, 2007, <http://blog.pmarca.com/2007/09/the-three-kinds.html>

<sup>12</sup> John Horrigan, "A Typology of Information and Communication Technology Users," Pew Internet and American Life, May 6, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Spencer Reiss, "His Space," *Wired* 14.07, June 2006, [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.07/murdoch\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.07/murdoch_pr.html).

<sup>14</sup> YouTube, Inc., "YouTube Uploads \$8M in Funding," April 5, 2006. [http://www.youtube.com/press\\_room\\_entry?entry=jwIToyFs2Lc](http://www.youtube.com/press_room_entry?entry=jwIToyFs2Lc)

<sup>15</sup> YouTube, Inc., "YouTube Ignites Online Campaigning With Its YouTube You Choose '08 Program," March 1, 2007. [http://www.youtube.com/press\\_room\\_entry?entry=v-gjuVQrwIk](http://www.youtube.com/press_room_entry?entry=v-gjuVQrwIk)

<sup>16</sup> And, in light of concerns about "DRM" technical regulations being sought by traditional content providers (Burk, 2005; Cohen, 2006; AUTHOR, 2007; Healy, 2002; Lessig, 1999;

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Lessig, 2004; Zittrain, 2006), “platform” may even help imply that the site’s technical architecture is a neutral one, without constraint or limit.

<sup>17</sup> see Lev Grossman, “*Time*’s Person of the Year: You,” *Time*, December 13, 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569514,00.html>

<sup>18</sup> YouTube, Inc., “Company History.” <http://www.youtube.com/t/about>

<sup>19</sup> In 2007, YouTube began a revenue sharing program with select “YouTube stars,” then later opened it to any user applying to be a “partner,” that YouTube approved. Approved partners get a cut of the AdSense revenue from ads paired with their videos. YouTube has not been forthcoming about exactly how much revenue they share; one journalist estimated it as 80 cents per thousand views, though YouTube responded that different users get different cuts. Liz Gannes, “YouTube Pays Users \$1 Million.” *NewTeeVee* April 16, 2008, <http://newteevee.com/2008/04/16/youtube-pays-users-1-million/>; Liz Gannes, “YouTube: All Partners Are Not the Same” *NewTeeVee*, April 16, 2008,

<http://newteevee.com/2008/04/16/youtube-all-partners-are-not-the-same/>. See YouTube, Inc., “The YouTube Partner Program,” <http://www.youtube.com/partners>.

<sup>20</sup> Tristan O’Carroll, “Google Acts to Boost Disappointing YouTube Revenue,” *Mediaweek*, July 9, 2008, <http://www.brandrepublic.com/News/830413/Google-acts-boost-disappointing-YouTube-revenue/>

<sup>21</sup> YouTube, Inc., “YouTube Fact Sheet,” [http://www.youtube.com/t/fact\\_sheet](http://www.youtube.com/t/fact_sheet)

<sup>22</sup> YouTube, Inc., “YouTube Premieres First International Film Competition,” October 1, 2007. [http://www.youtube.com/press\\_room\\_entry?entry=7vFv73FhLmg](http://www.youtube.com/press_room_entry?entry=7vFv73FhLmg)

<sup>23</sup> YouTube, Inc., “PBS Enhances Content Offering on Its Popular YouTube Channel,” January 16, 2008. [http://www.youtube.com/press\\_room\\_entry?entry=ABL6IQ3GaSw](http://www.youtube.com/press_room_entry?entry=ABL6IQ3GaSw)

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<sup>25</sup> It is possible to argue that, because part of what YouTube offers advertisers is not just the opportunity to advertise, but also a set of formats in which to present ads – banners, pre-rolls, overlays – that these are technically “applications” built on their platform. In a literal sense this may be the case, though of course user videos are compressed according to an algorithmic codec and thus are akin to applications. I don’t believe this is the semantic thrust of this use – advertisers are not designing these forms, just using them to present their ads – and would certainly not satisfy the definitional boundaries Andreessen proposes for the term.

<sup>26</sup> “Like What You See? Then Click-to-Buy on Youtube,” October 7, 2008,

[http://www.youtube.com/blog?entry=-y\\_3IbT8mJU](http://www.youtube.com/blog?entry=-y_3IbT8mJU)

<sup>27</sup> Adap.tv, “Make the Most of Online Video Advertising,” <http://adap.tv/publishers.html>

<sup>28</sup> Brightcove distinguishes between end-user destination sites like YouTube and “Internet TV platforms” like itself; it claims to have the largest share of this market. See Jeremy Allaire (Chairman & CEO) and Adam Berrey (SVP Marketing & Strategy), Brightcove, “Internet TV Platforms Come of Age,” <http://www.brightcove.com/about-us/perspectives/internet-tv-platforms/>. See also Erick Schonfeld, “Brightcove Is Already Streaming “Several Hundred Million” Videos A Month. Now Comes Brightcove 3,” *TechCrunch*, Oct 13, 2008, <http://www.techcrunch.com/2008/10/13/brightcove-is-already-streaming-several-hundred-million-videos-a-month-now-comes-brightcove-3/>

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<sup>29</sup> Brightcove, Inc., “Brightcove.TV FAQ”

[http://studio.brightcove.com/library/faq/bctv\\_discontinuation\\_faq.cfm](http://studio.brightcove.com/library/faq/bctv_discontinuation_faq.cfm)

<sup>30</sup> Brightcove, “The Brightcove Online Video Platform,” <http://www.brightcove.com/products/>

<sup>31</sup> Chad Hurley, keynote address, MIPCOM, October 16, 2008,

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<sup>33</sup> Kate Phillips, “Google Joins the Lobbying Herd,” *New York Times*, March 28, 2006,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/28/politics/28google.html>; Jim Puzzanghera, “Google makes some missteps as it finds its way in corridors of power” *Seattle Times*, May 29, 2006,

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<http://googlepublicpolicy.blogspot.com/2008/02/rep-markeys-net-neutrality-legislation.html>; this idea was repeated in their booklet “Technology, Economic Growth, and Open Government: Priorities for 2009,” posted publicly in November 2008, a kind of manifesto for their policy intentions for the incoming Obama administration.

[http://services.google.com/blog\\_resources/google\\_policyblog\\_tech\\_agenda.pdf](http://services.google.com/blog_resources/google_policyblog_tech_agenda.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> YouTube Team, “Dialogue with Sen. Lieberman on terrorism videos,” May 19, 2008,

<http://googlepublicpolicy.blogspot.com/2008/05/dialogue-with-sen-lieberman-on.html>

<sup>36</sup> It is worth connecting this issue, of spatial metaphors, to other kinds of metaphors that gain currency inside of policy deliberation – I’m thinking about “marketplace of ideas,” “public interest,” etc. Their relevance to and resonance in these deliberations has to do with not only the connotations they put forth, but a lack of specificity that makes the terms mobile and malleable. See Entman and Wildman 1992; Fiss 1996; Napoli 1999; Peters 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Communication Decency Act, <http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/47/230.html>

<sup>38</sup> Digital Millennium Copyright Act, <http://www.copyright.gov/legislation/dmca.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Viacom, Inc., “Viacom Files Federal Copyright Infringement Complaint Against YouTube and Google,” March 13, 2007. <http://www.viacom.com/news/pages/newstext.aspx?rid=1009865>

<sup>40</sup> Greg Sandoval, “Google, Viacom now clashing over YouTube employee records,” CNet, July 12, 2008, [http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023\\_3-9989783-93.html](http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023_3-9989783-93.html)

<sup>41</sup> Similar concerns have been raised for search engines, a similar mechanism promising unadulterated access to information but, in reality, shaping what appears and what does not in important ways. See Halavais 2008, Introna and Nissenbaum, 2000.

<sup>42</sup> YouTube, “A YouTube for All of Us,” December 2, 2008,

[http://www.youtube.com/blog?entry=AEX3\\_7h40mk](http://www.youtube.com/blog?entry=AEX3_7h40mk)

<sup>43</sup> This will only get more complicated, problematic, and obscure as we venture into cloud computing, sometimes called “platform-as-a-service (PaaS),” where the resources with which a distribution platform is built and hosted are themselves a platform, and yet another tier of interested intermediaries are involved in managing how content gets to those who want it.