

Research article

Platformization of Media Entrepreneurship: A Conceptual Development

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Abstract:

Purpose: Platformization is one of the most insightful theoretical frameworks with an exceptional potential to provide a fine-grained ground for understanding how digital platforms contribute to the development of the media industry by facilitating entrepreneurial activities. Therefore, given the significant role of digital platforms in developing the field of 'media entrepreneurship,' the present paper seeks to (re)reading the field of 'media entrepreneurship' by employing the platformization framework.

Methodology: We have adopted a conceptual research design, which tries to build a bridge between different theoretical frameworks in a novel way, and thus broaden our understanding on a particular issue. In so doing, we have calibrated our efforts based on the theory synthesis method. As such, using the platformization theoretical lens, this paper summarizes and integrates the fragmented literature on media entrepreneurship to offer a new way of thinking within this field.

Findings/Contribution: The investigations in this study corroborate the idea that media entrepreneurs should be equipped with a multi-paradigmatic lens to see how their practices may have beneficial implications for the media industries, and they can also engage in some unfair and monopolistic initiatives that are prompted by the platforms and/or by governmental interventions. The platformization framework, introduced and developed in this research, reveals its potential as insightful perspective to systematically move the field of media entrepreneurship forward, from theory to practice.

Keywords: Platformization; Media Entrepreneurship; Media Management; Digital Platform.

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have repeatedly been considered as the fundamental players in a vast array of markets, especially in the media and cultural industries. The impact of, and remarkable transformations resulted by, these digital actors have been so influential in the contemporary society to motivate some scholars to innovatively coin grand concepts such as "platform society" (Van Dijck et al., 2018), "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017a), and "platform revolution" (Parker et al., 2016),

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among some others. This reveals how ubiquitous and omnipresent platforms are, penetrating to the texture of modern private and working life, heralding promising opportunities, and also threatening challenges. As a consequence, the way in which work is being organized and workers are doing their job is now entirely different compared to the pre-digital society, a fact that has prompted Reillier and Reillier (2017) to refer to a new type of organization, the “platform-based” company.

Although the rise of digital platforms was considered as a software advancement at the very beginning, it soon translated into a brand new business logic with profound effects on the operational functioning and strategic mindsets of traditional industries (Tiwana, 2014). On one hand, the “sharing economy” feature, which in all its different declinations is at the heart of digital platforms, makes such technology frameworks appealing for both companies and individuals aiming to explore and exploit emerging opportunities (Sundararajan, 2016). On the other hand, the influential impact of these technologies on people’s everyday life made it attractive for governmental and political systems to intervene in these new spheres, seeking to steer the public opinion toward state’s interests (Avram et al., 2019). Digital platforms are thus being intensively embraced by all private and public actors in our society as they bring about a new ground for a more efficient economic progress (Gerpott & Niegel, 2002), and for continuous innovations in the trading of products, the exchange of new ideas, as well as the marketization of new realms of human life (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Considering these technology frameworks as the definite engines of innovation at our present time (Elia et al., 2020; Plantin et al., 2018; Srinivasan & Venkatraman, 2018), one might conclude that companies, as well as individual entrepreneurs, are obliged to proactively adapt to this new reality in order to reach a sustainable revenue in their business activities (Kim, 2016).

At this point, however, a few questions arise. How could digital platforms have such a transformative force in our current era? What made them so attractive for all economic and social actors within our society? Answering these questions highly depends on the way in which ‘new’ value is created by these new technologies. The most apparent value offered by digital platforms is that all actors can quickly come together to interact with each other and freely transact value as they wish (Srnicsek, 2017b). More clearly, thanks to technological advancement, a new interactive context has emerged in which an unprecedented amount of value is being created by connecting people, companies, and resources (Parker et al., 2016; Mazzucato, 2018). Notwithstanding the different types of digital platform—e.g. content, transactional, and social platforms (Steinberg, 2019)—all of them are pursuing a simple target, i.e. to “provide an open, plug-and-play infrastructure, make available a secure transaction mechanism and provide a reputation system that many claim solves the problem of screening so that strangers can comfortably interact with each other” (Strømmen-Bakhtiar & Vinogradov, 2020: ix). We believe that digital platforms have created a new umbrella under which all of us are living, or literally breathing. We increasingly buy new products, inform ourselves, learn, teach and basically work through digital platforms. Trying to define the new era induced by the technological development of media, Deuze (2011) called it “media life”. This term mostly relates to the media-saturated environment of contemporary society and human lives. Today, referring to the pervasive penetration of all types of transactional and social platforms into human life, we think that time has come to (re)label the present era as “platform life”.

As well reported later in this paper, there is a clear connection between digital platforms and entrepreneurial activities (Nambisan & Baron, 2019), especially in the media industries (Horst & Hitters, 2020; Horst et al., 2020). As a matter of fact, having the capability to fuel entrepreneurial orientation is a must for media companies to keep up with the new imperatives imposed by the current digital ecosystem (Cenamor et al., 2019; Murschetz et al., 2020). The emerging roles of digital platforms have created not only a unique context, but more so a “new trend” to foster entrepreneurship in the media industries (Khajeheian, 2020). In the academic sphere this new trend is reflected in a now widely known sub-field of media management research called “media entrepreneurship” (Achtenhagen, 2017; Khajeheian, 2017b). Thanks to the diminished entry barriers and combined with the increasing interest in using online platforms (Hossain, 2019), media markets

are now more open than ever to multiple actors who have the opportunity to produce and distribute media content at much lower cost compared to the pre-digital era (Khajeheian, 2019a; Salamzadeh et al., 2019), and to access a plethora of diverse users for creating value within media markets (McKelvie & Picard, 2008). Digital platforms have provided media entrepreneurs with new tools to engage with a vast array of users more deeply and precisely (Khajeheian, 2014), making media firms more customer-oriented (McKelvie & Picard, 2008). As a research sub-field of media management, media entrepreneurship is thus evolving based on the emerging opportunities created by technology frameworks such as digital platforms. As a consequence, it will be highly dependent on their development (Khajeheian, 2019b).

Platformization provides a fine-grained ground for understanding the overall contributions of digital platforms to the development of different research fields. In general, from a media perspective, this concept has been defined "as the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018: 4276). However, despite the significant role played by digital platforms in shaping and developing the field of media entrepreneurship, as highlighted by Khajeheian (2017b), to the best of our knowledge there is no systematic attempt to make sense of the field by using the platformization framework yet. And also more in general, only a limited effort has been made "on theorizing the role of specific aspects of digital technologies in shaping entrepreneurial opportunities, decisions, actions, and outcomes" as Nambisan recalls (2017: 2). The present paper, therefore, seeks to (re)read the field of 'media entrepreneurship' by employing the platformization framework, elaborating on and modifying its newest version developed by Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck (2019). By so doing, some suggestions can be outlined to move the field forward more systematically in the age of digital platforms.

Accordingly, the rest of the present paper is structured as follows. First, the research methodology based on which we developed our ideas is clarified. Second, some significant definitions and typologies of digital platforms are provided. Third, the concept of platformization is described, and an analytical framework to address it is also introduced. Fourth, specificities of the media business have been outlined to pave the way toward an understanding of media entrepreneurship, knowing that the uniqueness of this field is highly dependent on the distinctive characteristics of media organizations and products. Fifth, the very concept of media entrepreneurship has been clarified by showing some theoretical progress in its recent development. Then, a connection between the platformization framework and the media entrepreneurship field is built. By reorganizing previous studies based on the platformization lens, a new understanding of the field is introduced. Finally, concluding remarks are provided to show how the field of media entrepreneurship can be developed in a digitalized business ecosystem.

2. Methodology

While empirical studies are concerned with collecting primary data from the real world, this research rests on purposefully integrating previous results. In doing so, we have adopted a conceptual research design in accordance with the outlines offered by Jaakkola (2020). As the author argues, a conceptual approach allows to create a bridge between different theoretical frameworks in a novel way, and thus to broaden our understanding of a particular issue. While there are different types of research design for conceptual studies, as clarified by Jaakkola, we have calibrated our efforts on the theory synthesis design, which "seeks to achieve conceptual integration across multiple theories or literature streams" (Jaakkola, 2020). As such, using the platformization theoretical lens, this paper has summarized and integrated the fragmented literature on media entrepreneurship to transform previous results into a higher order perspective and offer a new way of thinking within this field.

For collecting articles, a thorough search has been conducted within some major scientific databases including Google Scholar, Scopus, Sage, Wiley, Taylor and Francis, Emerald, and Elsevier. Moreover, we improved our search scope by taking a closer look at the issues published by some well-renown journals in the fields of media management and entrepreneurship including, the International Journal on Media Management (Routledge), Journal of Media Business Studies (Routledge), International Journal of Media Management and Entrepreneurship (IGI Global), and also the inaugural issue of the Nordic Journal of Media Management (Alborg University). The keywords that have been used include “media entrepreneurship,” “media business,” “media start-up,” among many others. After screening the collected papers, we organized them according to each dimension offered by the platformization framework.

3. Digital platforms: definitions and typologies

As the interest in studying digital platforms is growing, the number of diverse definitions regarding the nature of these technologies is proliferating. Until now, we generally made sense of a digital platform as a context in which different groups are digitally connected and enabled to transact value (Reillier & Reillier, 2017). However, in order to grasp the very nature of digital platforms and their profound impacts, a much more in-depth approach is needed. In Table 1 we thus provide some of the most recent definitions introduced by various authors from different fields. Of great importance appears the point that digital platforms should neither be considered merely as technological construct nor as economic facilitator. In this regard, Van Dijck et al. (2018: 2) introduce a wide angle through which these technologies should be looked at:

We agree that online platforms are at the core of an important development, but we think of them neither as an exclusive economic phenomenon nor as a technological construct with social corollaries. Rather, we prefer a comprehensive view of a connective world where platforms have penetrated the heart of societies— affecting institutions, economic transactions, and social and cultural practices— hence forcing governments and states to adjust their legal and democratic structures.

There are different types among the current digital platforms, each of which is operating uniquely, with one or more specific audience groups as a target. To understand some of the major types, four typologies of digital platforms have been identified and introduced in Table 2. As shown in this table, digital platforms are operating almost in every realm of human life, from economic to social and political activities. Considering that they are anything but neutral in shaping the structures of societies (Casilli & Posada, 2019), one might feel a necessity to address the implications of these technologies more broadly, which is what we will discuss when dealing with the platformization concept in the next section.

Table 1. The definitions of digital platform (The authors)

No.	Author(s), year, and page	Definition
1	(Parker et al., 2016: 29 in Kindle version)	<i>Platforms are complex, multisided systems that must support large networks of users who play different roles and interact in a wide variety of ways.</i>
2	(Reillier & Reillier, 2017: 22)	<i>A business creating significant value through the acquisition, matching and connection of two or more customer groups to enable them to transact.</i>
3	(Van Dijck et al., 2018: 4)	<i>An online “platform” is a programmable digital architecture designed to organize interactions between users— not just end users but also corporate entities and public bodies.</i>
4	(Hsieh & Wu, 2019: 316)	<i>A platform, however, refers to a technology that allows other businesses to connect and build on top of it. As such, a platform business acts as a medium which lets others connect to it.</i>
5	(Poell et al., 2019: 3)	<i>We define platforms as (re-)programmable digital infrastructures that facilitate and shape personalised interactions among end-users and complementors, organised through the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetisation, and circulation of data.</i>

Table 2. Four typologies of digital platforms (The authors)

No.	Author(s), year, and page	Platform's type	Description	Example(s)
1	(Reillier & Reillier, 2017: 6).	Marketplaces	Attract, match and connect those looking to provide a product or service (producers) with those looking to buy that product or service (users).	Amazon Uber
		Social and content networks	Enable users to communicate with each other by sharing information, comments, messages, videos and pictures, and then connect users with third parties such as advertisers, developers and content providers.	Facebook Instagram Twitter YouTube LinkedIn WeChat Slack
		Credit card and payment platforms	Attract users on one side to pay for goods and services, and merchants on the other side to be able to take their payment.	PayPal Visa
		Operating systems for computers, mobiles, game consoles, VR equipment and associated app stores	Match users with software applications produced by developers.	Android Apple iOS Google app store
2	(Fehrer et al., 2018: 552)	Multi-sided platforms; multi-sided markets	Platforms function as market intermediaries and enable connection of various user groups which provide each other with network benefits.	Airbnb, Uber, eBay, Alibaba
		Platform ecosystems as technology ecosystems	Platforms as extensible codebases of software systems that provide core functionalities for applications that run on them.	Cisco, Android, iOS
		Platforms ecosystems as platform-based markets	Platform ecosystem as networks of partnerships formed around platform providers.	Google, Amazon
3	(Hsieh & Wu, 2019, pp. 316–317)	Innovation platforms	Provide an environment for developers through which they develop complementary products and services.	Apple iOS Google Android
		Transaction platforms/on demand (work/staffing) platforms	Offer a link between individuals and institutions, facilitating their various interactions and commercial transactions. Enable the exchange of goods and services between individuals.	Amazon eBay Uber Airbnb OnForce In ProFinder
		Integration platforms	Offer the capabilities of both transaction and innovation functions.	Google Apple
		Investment platforms	Platforms as holding companies who manage a portfolio of platform companies	Booking Holdings (Priceline, Kayak, Open Table)

4	(Kim & Min, 2019, pp. 10–11)	Producer-oriented platform (supplier type)	The producers deliver certain products and services to the consumers through the platform.	Online distribution platforms, App store platforms, Open market platforms
		Consumer-oriented platform (tailor type)	Consumers request products or services from producers through platforms. Producers then deliver these products and services to consumers through platforms.	Online Ad platforms, Idea platform, Appropriate technology platform
		Both-oriented platform (facilitator type)	Platform participants become a “prosumer” who has the attributes of both the producer and consumer	Social media platforms

4. Platformization: concept and analytical framework

The ubiquitous presence of and the accomplishments occurred through digital intermediaries have prompted Casilli and Posada (2019) to define the period in which our contemporary life is embedded in as ‘the paradigm of the platform’. Referring to it as a paradigm, as Nieborg and Poell (2018) explain, reminds us that a digital platform should not just be considered as an economic or technological facilitator. Instead, such technology frameworks are actively organizing and steering societal relations. Accordingly, the process through which they are transforming all structures in our societies has been named as “platformization” (Nieborg & Helmond, 2019; Van Dijck et al., 2018). Referring to this process, that is not unidirectional in nature (de Kloet et al., 2019), enables us to reach out to a comprehensive picture of how digital platforms are impacting on media organizations, entrepreneurship, and individuals. At the same time, it helps us to understand the evolution of media entrepreneurship alongside the advancement of digital technologies.

With the evolution of digital platforms, different definitions of platformization have been introduced by the leading scholars in this research domain. After some previous substantial efforts (Helmond, 2015; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Nieborg & Poell, 2019), a much more developed and refined version of the concept has been provided by Poell et al. (2019: 1), who conceive platformization as “the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms.” To better understand the platformization process, Poell et al. (2019) have introduced an analytical framework divided into four separated but interconnected areas. These areas reflect perspectives issued from different disciplines and include (a) business studies, (b) critical political economy studies, (c) software studies, and (d) cultural studies. In what follows, we show what each area entails in terms of theoretical assumptions.

Looking at business studies, investigations mainly concern how digital platforms may have an impact on the managerial and strategic decisions in order to obtain profits (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Pricing and engagement strategies are some examples, among many others, of the inquiries that should be taken into account when analyzing and evaluating a platform-based business ecosystem. While this perspective sheds some light on the economic and managerial issues of using platforms for media entrepreneurship purposes, it pays little attention to the historical, political, and normative aspects related to the application of these technologies in the media business. The critical political economy perspective seems to fill this gap as it is concerned with investigating power relations as well as historical and normative matters that are shaping the operations of platforms (Mosco, 2009). In more transparent words, this lens mostly seeks to explore the ways in which platforms are sustaining, producing, or promoting any type of inequality and scandals under the name of economic and technological progress.

The third perspective, that of software studies, looks at the computational and infrastructural aspects of digital platforms influencing the particular types of connections, or user activities. More precisely, it pays special attention to “the end-user/platform relationship and comprises detailed explorations of how the socio-technical features of platforms allow and prompt end-users to afford particular types of activities, connections, and knowledge” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018: 4280). How data analytics in digital platforms might help entrepreneurs in targeting some specific users is an example in this domain (Nieborg & Poell, 2019).

Last but not least, the fourth perspective of the platformization analytical framework refers to cultural studies. Within this area, issues such as platform users’ emerging practices are to be considered. As the name “cultural” implies, the emerging user activities and social interactions taking place within digital platforms, and influencing people’s behavior and values, are the aspects to which attention is mostly paid. However, digital platforms and the resulting change in users’ interactions, behavior and values are directly modifying work and employment relations, too. A closer investigation of the ways in which the nature of labor is being changed by these technologies is thus needed. Previous researchers in this realm “have critically examined how specific practices and understandings of labour emerged within platform markets” (Poell et al., 2019: 5). It is thus well documented that digital platforms have a significant impact on the nature of work done not only by users, but also by the professional individuals who are earning money primarily through these platforms (Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Duffy et al., 2019). In this regard, Casilli and Posada (2019) show, for example, how digital platforms have brought to the “taskification of work,” i.e. the breaking down of jobs into simple or micro components (cf. Braverman, 1998). This approach offers companies the ability to draw on an unlimited network of resources including technical experts, professionals, robots or simply human labor who individually accomplish small fragments of a single job. Further, Lin and de Kloet (2019) highlight that digital platforms have altered the very concept of worker, as it has been transformed from “employee” to “complementor” or “subcontractor.” If this transformation at the level of work can be considered from a business and a critical political economy point of view, it is clear that it also reflects a change of both social and organizational culture.

Platforms are indeed the tools that boosted the transformation of working relations and contracts from fixed and long term to flexible and short term (Ilsøe & Larsen, 2020). They also transformed the nature of work from physical to virtual and remote. Digital platforms, besides, have entirely changed the way how companies recruit their employees (Küng, 2017), how they collaborate with independent external partners even just for a single project. Right now, in the time of the Coronavirus crisis, platforms have gained even more importance and dominance in this sense by shaping the way how work can continue and be ensured during a lock-down. The transformation of the nature of work can be even more significant for media entrepreneurs (see Tokbaeva, 2020). New media startups, for example, have an opportunity to emerge thanks to the possibility to access a worldwide network of potential collaborators and partners offered by digital platforms. Considering such emerging practices, by and large, we allow ourselves to extend the fourth lens to analyze the platformization process by (re)naming it “cultural and labor studies.” This way, the opportunities and challenges regarding both emerging cultural practices characterizing the behavior of users and the entrepreneurial activities of professionals can be taken into account simultaneously.

5. Specificities of media firms and products

Some leading scholars in the field of media entrepreneurship have argued that media industries are different from the other industries in terms of products, companies, individuals, and so forth (see Khajeheian, 2017a). That is why Hang and van Weezel (2007) hold that media entrepreneurship needs to improve its academic positioning by considering the intrinsic features of media companies and products. As Achtenhagen also (2017: 2) pointed out, “media entrepreneurship research needs to be able to tell us something about entrepreneurship based on the intimate understanding of the media industry’s functioning.” In what follows, therefore, a concise overview of the characteristics of media

firms and products is presented to create a conceptual base for understanding the nature of media entrepreneurship that will be discussed in the next section.

Due to the development of digital technologies, media firms have been evolving and cannot be considered as mere content and news providers anymore. They are now generally defined as “organizers of public, media-based communication which today operate as content providers, as platform operators, or in hybrid forms” (Hess, 2014: 6). On the other hand, media companies admittedly represent a significant element of our contemporary social life (Picard, 2002; Tjernstrom, 2002) as their products and services contribute to shape our emotions (Hill, 2016) and interactions, thereby forging our public image or “media life” (Deuze, 2011; Faustino & Ribeiro, 2016). They are also considered as political and economic organizations (Tjernström, 2000). In other words, “they are able—and even expected—to influence public opinion, government policy, and citizen voting behavior” (Napoli, 1997: 207). As Lowe (2016) and Mierzejewska (2018) state, the unique position that characterizes media firms, compared to other firms, is due to the various kinds of products they create and distribute, the different people who work in these companies and their potential contribution to the cultural, economic, political, social, and technological affairs in every society. In order to manage media firms, media professionals need to have ‘media-specific’ competencies, in addition to other general managerial competencies (Dal Zotto, 2005; Artero & Manfredi, 2016; Murschetz & Friedrichsen, 2017). Moreover, given the rise of new technologies and media convergence (Dal Zotto & Lugmayr, 2016; Rohn, 2018), nowadays media managers have to face the competition of new players coming from other industries and, as a consequence, more diverse issues compared with previous years (Faustino & Ribeiro, 2016: 62). For example, due to emerging business opportunities in the digital ecosystem, media business is growing at an unprecedented level while state bodies try to care about its ethical implications in the society (Altmeyden et al., 2017).

Content lies at the heart of media products, which distinguish themselves in single creation and continuous creation products, depending if they are idea or concept driven (Picard, 2005; Dal Zotto & van Kranenburg, 2008). In this regard, Doyle (2016: 176) notes, “an unusual but crucial economic attribute for media content industries is that the essential quality that consumers get value from resides in meanings, which are not, in themselves, material objects.” If also Will et al. (2016) underline their higher digitalization and thus dematerialization compared to other products, Faustino and Ribeiro (2016: 63) point out that “media products are the result of creative, informative and artistic work; they therefore receive copyright production, which does not happen as often with other types of products and industries.” Put it in a different way, media products are characterized by “their capacity to meet the needs and satisfy the desires of potential consumers by providing information, persuasive communication, and entertainment contents” (Medina et al., 2016: 243).

In any case, the very quality of media content is mainly dependent on the creativity, skills, and knowledge of the individuals who work within media firms. Thus, one of the most valuable assets of media organizations is represented by their human resources (Malmelin & Virta, 2016; Picard, 2005). Indeed, media professionals have been considered as crucial in order to foster innovation across media organization, and “the challenge for media companies in the future is how to learn to develop and manage their innovation potential at all levels of the organization” (Wilenius & Malmelin, 2009: 135).

A further specific feature of media firms is that they generally operate in two markets: on one hand, they compete with each other on the content market to sell their products and services to the targeted consumers. On the other hand, media firms also rival with each other for the audience attention, a product that they sell on the advertising market (Picard, 2005; Doyle, 2016; Godes et al., 2009). The role of the audience is one of the most critical factors within a digitalized media industry context. Not only it represents both a consumer and a product, it also has become a content ‘producer’. Thus, along with the process of ‘audience evolution’, media firms must continuously adapt themselves (Napoli, 2003, 2011, 2016).

The above mentioned specificities of media firms and products, allow us to better understand why “an entrepreneurship scholar may consider media to be a relevant context of study since it exhibits a high level of creativity manifested in new business ideas and entrepreneurial initiatives in the digital economy” (Ots et al., 2015: 104). Indeed, media and entrepreneurship seem to be two highly related and even interdependent fields, which nourish each other. It is thus not surprising that some scholars in the field of media management have underlined the importance of media entrepreneurship by claiming that entrepreneurship in the media industries needs to be considered as an independent field of study (see Sindik & Graybeal, 2017). Considering this, it is now necessary to more closely discuss the nature of media entrepreneurship.

6. Media entrepreneurship

It has already been shown that media industries represent a field full of novel opportunities for entrepreneurs (Hang, 2016), and appealing enough for some scholars to establish a systematic connection between media and entrepreneurship nearly a couple of decades ago (e.g., Dowling & Mellewigt, 2002; Franke & Schreier, 2002). To make sense of the connection between media and entrepreneurship, Hang (2016: 157) has insightfully noted that:

As a scientific field of research, entrepreneurship has strong relevance to media, and particularly to media management studies. A creative feature and an artistic process of content production differentiate media products and services from other industrial outputs, and the essential characteristics of the entrepreneurial activities such as creation, innovation and novel ways of thinking are critical in building media business success. Therefore, studies on entrepreneurship and media appear necessary and meaningful.

In addition to the business opportunities that media markets may offer, entrepreneurs are often motivated to enter the media business by some political, cultural, or social missions that they want to pursue (Hoag & Compaine, 2006). Further, according to Will, Gossel, and Windscheid (2020), there are three main reasons why entrepreneurship in the field of media is considered so special and attractive. First, content production and distribution, which are at the very heart of media business, make entrepreneurial activities fascinating and glamorous for practitioners. Second, media entrepreneurship is highly dependent on technological advancement (Compaine & Hoag, 2012; Weezel, 2010), especially in the current digitalized business ecosystem. The continuous progress of technology is constantly promising new opportunities for media entrepreneurs (Khajeheian, 2016b; Powers & Zhao, 2019). Third, media are so intertwined with society and people’s everyday life that, compared to the other fields of entrepreneurship, they represent a far more unique field of intervention for policies and political bodies (Roshandel Arbatani et al., 2019).

As far as the definition of ‘media entrepreneurship’ is concerned, various attempts were made to pave the way for a systematic study in this field. For example, Hoag (2008: 74) conceptualized it “as the creation and ownership of an enterprise whose activity adds an independent voice to the media marketplace”. Achtenhagen (2008: 126) provided another angle to look at media entrepreneurship and defines it as “how new ventures aimed at bringing into existence future media goods and services are initially conceived of and subsequently developed, by whom, and with what consequences.” Among such endeavors, we recall also Khajeheian’s work, which tried to take into account all previous attempts to define media entrepreneurship (e.g., Khajeheian, 2013; Khajeheian & Roshandel Arbatani, 2011) and finally combined them into a new integrative description of the field. For Khajeheian (2017b: 102) media entrepreneurship includes some significant elements such as:

- Taking the risk to exploit opportunities (creation/discovery)
- Using resources in an innovative way (radical/incremental/imitatives)
- Transforming ideas into activities that offer value (creation/delivery) in a media format (content/platform/user data)
- Meeting the needs of a specific portion of the market (advertisers/consumers) through an individual effort, by creating a new venture, or intrapreneurial activities within an existing organizational entity
- Earning a benefit (money/attention/behavior) from whom is willing to pay (direct consumer/advertisers/data seekers or any customer interested in consumers' information).

Media entrepreneurship thus appears as an interdisciplinary field (Hang, 2018), engaging a vast array of actors, ideas, and resources (Horst & Murschetz, 2019), and experiencing a significant speed in its theoretical and practical development (Ifeduba, 2013). Some critical scholars have taken a pessimistic point of view and consider entrepreneurial activities within media industries as an unfavorable sign of neoliberalism and its greedy orientation towards the marketization of every aspect of the media sphere (e.g. Cohen, 2015). Some other scholars are more optimistic and view media entrepreneurship as a helpful solution to counteract economic crises and the subsequent unemployment problems (Khajeheian, 2013). We look at media entrepreneurship as a field that may have both bright and dark sides for societies, organizations, as well as individuals. That is why we are trying to reorganize this field through the lens of a new theoretical framework, i.e. platformization, and thus provide a broader picture of what this field may include.

7. Platformization of media entrepreneurship

In our present time, digital platforms not only represent very helpful tools for fostering business activities, but also increasingly fulfill a mediating function, thus contributing to the construction of our social realities (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Not surprisingly, this new digital ecosystem has progressively and substantially influenced also the highly technology-based field of media entrepreneurship. In the following sections, we try to make sense of the evolution of this field. By applying an extended version of the analytical framework that Poell et al. (2019) developed to analyse the platformization process, and thus taking a business, software, political economy, as well as a culture and labor studies perspective, we show how media entrepreneurship and platformization are deeply interwoven. Before exploring in depth this relation, we summarize in Figure 1 the main implications that platformization has for the field of media entrepreneurship within the above mentioned four areas of studies.

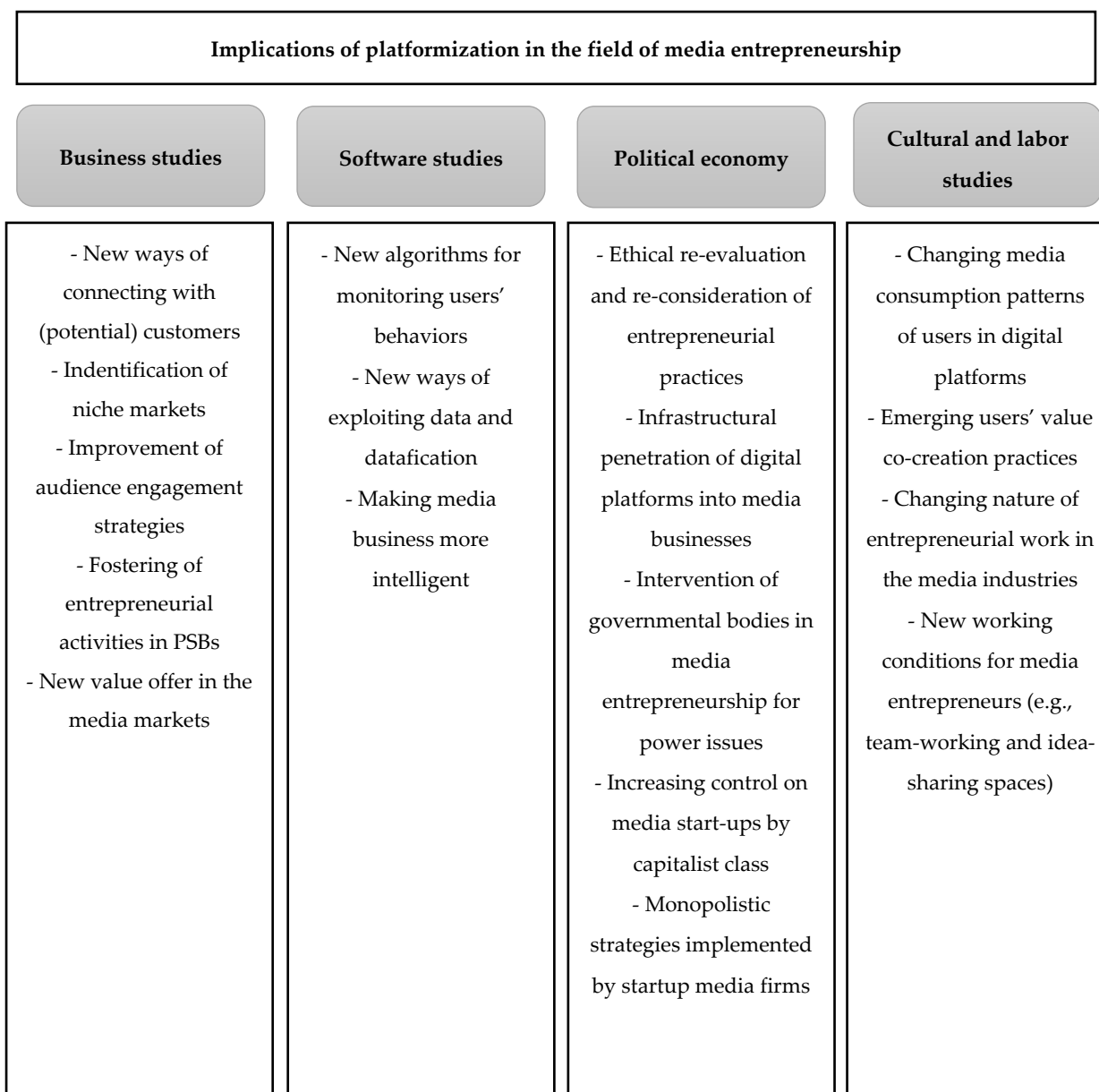


Figure 1. The platformization framework and its implications in the field of media entrepreneurship

7.1. Business studies perspective

The media entrepreneurship field has recently been experiencing a considerable deal of progress in how digital platforms may influence media business operations and entrepreneurial activities. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, have helped entrepreneurs in the media industries to make more in-depth connections with their (potential) customers (Ebrahimi et al., 2019). In addition to a significant positive impact on the customer relations management (CRM) performance of small and medium media companies (Ebrahimi et al., 2019), social media platforms enable entrepreneurs to explore unique niche markets within the media industries (Nel et al., 2020; Nemati & Khajeheian, 2018). One of the inspiring outcomes brought by digital media platforms into the sphere of media entrepreneurship is the feature of “online interactivity.” As Gleason and Murschetz (2019) highlight, it enables media entrepreneurs to create and deliver the proposed value at lower cost and more intelligently. Online interactivity further fosters the audience engagement strategies employed by media entrepreneurs, enabling them to shorten the distance between themselves and the target audience. Digital platforms can be useful also to stimulate entrepreneurial

orientation in public service broadcasting (PSB), for instance by creating the opportunity to improve TV programs and services by capturing value from user generated innovations (Khajeheian & Tadayoni, 2016). As far as media entrepreneurship in the music industry is concerned, it has been shown that digital platforms can provide an appropriate context to boost social interactions between audiences and artists, making it possible for entrepreneurs to attain a sustainable source of revenue by acting as a proactive interaction facilitator (Tschmuck, 2016; Arbatani et al., 2018; Omidi et al., 2020). It should be noted that, in order to better exploit the potentialities of digital platforms, media companies at all levels of growth and development should consider improving their entrepreneurial orientation (EO), which means “characterizing and distinguishing key entrepreneurial processes of firms by capturing the methods, practices and decision-making styles that managers use to act entrepreneurially” (Achtenhagen, 2020: 8).

7.2. Software studies perspective

In this section, we focus on the technical features of digital platforms, including their computational logic and algorithmic operations. The underlying assumption here is that “these online activities hide a system whose logic and logistics are about more than facilitating: they actually shape the way we live and how society is organized” (Van Dijck et al., 2018: 9). Thanks to the impressive advancement of digital software and applications, people’s practices and behaviors are more controlled and oriented (Rahman & Thelen, 2019). Digital platforms are directed in such a way that they can turn every interaction, choice, and user’s practice to exploitable data. The resulting ‘big data’ are of great importance in the media business (Just, 2018). Although this trend may have a devastating effect on the quality of human life, called data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), it has opened up a fruitful venue for media entrepreneurs to launch new ventures and exploit the emerging opportunities. In line with this, Parker et al. (2016) hold that the varied technical features of digital applications and platforms have enabled entrepreneurs to intelligently capture potential customers’ preferences (see also Kraus et al., 2018), and to connect with them in a more personalized manner. Furthermore, those platform related features made it possible for every kind of entrepreneurial business to operate at the same time as an advertising company (Khajeheian, 2016a). Finally, the datafication brought about by digital technology frameworks seems to make platforms, previously operating in the different markets, converge into a single uniformed market, i.e. the “data” business market (Srnicsek, 2017b).

In the context of media entrepreneurship research, in its broader conception, Kolli and Khajeheian (2018) have for instance addressed the ways in which a digital game, such as Pokemon, is promoting some particular type of interactions among users. Their results showed that some features in this digital game motivated users to behave in a more meaningful and social way. When looking at the ridesharing online business in emerging markets, Arbatani, Norouzi, Omidi, and Valero-Pastor (2019) describe how two Iranian digital competitors, i.e. Snapp and Tap30, are continuously exploiting new opportunities by adding novel features to their mobile applications. For example, Snapp introduced dedicated services just for women passengers, while Tap30 offered passengers the possibility to share trips and thus lower their cost. As far as digital platforms in the music industry are concerned, some scholars advice entrepreneurs to design applications in such a way that more collective activities among users are encouraged (Arbatani et al., 2018), or to add further features to the applications in order to better respond to the users’ diverse musical needs by offering services such as “music on-demand” (Omidi et al., 2020). Basically, the technical software features, on which digital platforms and applications base, are not only fueling but also substantially shaping the development of entrepreneurial activities in the media industry. An industry whose boudaries are becoming more and more blurred and that seems to be progressively merging with the rising data industry (Tang, 2016).

7.3. Political economy studies perspective

Digital platforms have been gaining popularity very fast in many societies as they introduced possibilities for communicating more rapidly and globally, for conducting market transactions more efficiently, targeting customers more intelligently, and so forth. At the same time though, these platforms brought about some problems, too (Nash et al., 2017). After the scandals that concerned high profile digital platforms such as Facebook (Gorwa, 2019) or Alibaba (Zhang, 2020), the necessity emerged for a more critical re-evaluation and re-consideration of the way how these digital actors operate. The infrastructural penetration into the business operations of economic actors (Srnicek, 2017b), which is clearly observable in the media industry, is one of the main elements that allowed digital platforms to acquire a powerful position in our societies. By providing some of the core infrastructures needed for entrepreneurial ventures in the media industry (see Nechushtai, 2018), digital platforms can exercise a considerable control over and a shaping power for the development or even exploitation of those media ventures. As Van Dijck et al. (2018: 16) pointed out, “infrastructural platforms can obtain unprecedented power because they are uniquely able to connect and combine data streams and fuse information and intelligence.” Considering these facts, it might be concluded that, by exploiting and extracting value from digital social interactions, digital platforms can exacerbate existing inequalities and uneven access to resources (Mazzucato, 2018; Avram et al., 2019).

Governments and political institutions have always been trying to increase their power to influence public opinion by penetrating the media sphere. In this regard, Tokbaeva (2019) highlights how the Russian state has been increasing its power position through the acquisition of digital news networks launched by media entrepreneurs in that country. In another study conducted by Girija (2019) in India, it has been shown how the capitalist class is developing an hegemonic control, i.e. exerting control through consent rather than coercion, by donating financial grants to some successful local digital media start-ups. Focusing on the ridesharing digital platforms in Iran, Arbatani et al. (2019) have indicated how a digital operator, namely Snapp, is seeking to monopolize the market by implementing unfair business strategies. The company has for instance forbidden its riders to simultaneously work for the other application providers, while not even providing any compensation plan to support its riders. These kinds of monopoly-oriented strategies can have highly adverse effects, especially when most of the workers involved come from disadvantaged social groups (see Hoang et al., 2020). Approaching entrepreneurial media activities from a critical political economy perspective reminds us how platformization might serve to enhance and reinforce power relations instead of helping media industries flourish economically (Girija, 2020).

7.4. Cultural and labor studies perspective

As explained previously in this paper, cultural studies are concerned mostly with emerging practices linked to the penetration of digital platforms into our private and working life and that are shaping a new digital culture (Deuze, 2006; Miller, 2020). Labor studies on the other hand are paying attention to how the very nature of labor is changing within the present digital ecosystems (Rahman & Thelen, 2019). As digital platforms are evolving, consumption patterns are respectively changing, too. To harvest and capitalize on new user practices inside the platforms, media entrepreneurs have to keep in mind “the macro trends that are disrupting how people consume media: time spent with technology, user-generated content, digital innovation/disruption, and above all, mobile access” (Abernathy & Sciarrino, 2019: 148). The co-creation of value by users is one of the most significant practices that emerged with the development of digital technologies (Hamidi et al., 2019). In this regard, Gladysz, Khajeheian, and Lashkari (2018) showed how adopting the new strategy of co-creation media entrepreneurs might reach promising results within the Polish media market. By directly engaging users, a co-creation strategy can also significantly increase the users’ loyalty toward media brands and organizations (Khajeheian & Ebrahimi, 2020; Sadrabadi et al., 2018; Sharifi et al., 2019).

Digital platforms are not only fostering the emergence of new user practices, they are also forging a new way of understanding, organizing and managing work and employee relations. They are basically creating a totally new labor culture in which employees are working more and more on a flexible, if not independent and on-demand basis (Horst & Hitters, 2020; Horst et al., 2020). Social media for instance not only enable organizations to more directly communicate with external stakeholders, such as audiences, consumers and advertisers. They also enhance and facilitate internal communication by creating new ways to work in teams, share work, develop ideas and connect with team members across time and space (Horst & Hitters, 2020). Digital platforms have a considerable power to re-structure the nature of work—for example, splitting jobs into smaller fragments as Amazon has already been doing by developing the already well-known Amazon's Mechanical Turk. This way of de-constructing work is preventing workers to understand the meaning, the goal and contribution of their tasks, thus having a negative impact on workers' motivation, satisfaction, productivity and finally overall performance (Zhao et al., 2019). However, despite the negative effects that digital platforms can have on work, against which measures should be taken, the opportunities that those platforms offer to crowdsource experts and talents online and globally are undisputable, too. Thus, strong attention should be paid to better understand how digital technology frameworks may be applied to improve media entrepreneurs' individual experiences and their capability to successfully grow their business ventures, i.e. by supporting them in recruiting new talent, developing a collaborative and inclusive organizational culture (Küng, 2017), as well as in the creation of appropriate virtual spaces for team-working and idea-sharing (Khajeheian, 2018).

8. Conclusions

The present study attempts to indicate the diverse complexities and opportunities that the field of media entrepreneurship is facing. More clearly, by adopting the platformization framework, the paper has reorganized the extant literature to shed some light on how this field is multi-faceted and intertwined with a vast array of societal concerns in the age of digital platforms. The investigations in this study also corroborate the idea that media entrepreneurs should be equipped with a multi-paradigmatic lens within an industry such as the media, which is more and more merging with the technology-driven data industry. Such a multi-disciplinary and system-oriented perspective is necessary for media entrepreneurs to understand how to successfully navigate their companies within an environment threatened by unfair and monopolistic initiatives prompted by digital platforms and/or by governmental interventions. The platformization framework, introduced and developed in this research, has quite a potentiality to be considered as an insightful perspective to systematically move the field of media entrepreneurship forward, from theory to practice.

While the impact of software studies on the future of media entrepreneurial ventures has only marginally been considered by previous studies in the field of media entrepreneurship, it can be argued that software studies will be of great importance for raising new and critical issues, and thus develop the field. The use of new platforms and algorithms does not only introduce new business opportunities for media entrepreneurs, as we have witnessed in the emerging data business markets, it also raises many ethical matters. In order not to fall in a deterministic technological approach, we further insist that the ways in which media entrepreneurship will be affected by new digital technologies will be highly dependent on the entrepreneurs' ability to fully harness the opportunities that digital platforms offer, which cannot abstract from a change of culture, as cultural and labor studies show. This means for entrepreneurs to take into account not only the social-cultural changes reflected in both audience and customers' preferences, but also changes in the nature of work. The latter requires an open, pro-digital entrepreneurial culture able to establish new employment relations, as well as appropriate measures to acquire, motivate, compensate and reward increasingly disconnected, remote working employees and collaborators.

8.1. Research limitations

As this study conducted a purposive literature review, it is possible that some research was missed during the process of articles selection. For this reason, further researcher could surely broaden the scope by including more literature addressing the concerned issue in this paper. While each area of the platformization framework includes various and different theoretical perspectives – consider for example the various orientations in the critical political economy area of media studies (Cunningham et al., 2015)— we had to focus just on the central theoretical assumption behind each area in order not to confuse our core idea with some other theoretical aspects. However, this way of proceeding may have caused some theoretical limitations or bias in our research. This should be taken into consideration for future investigations.

8.2. Theoretical implications

The present paper contributes to theoretical debates mainly in three directions. First, it improves the understanding of the platformization framework and manifests its potentiality for adding new knowledge in the field of media entrepreneurship. Second, this study has developed the very platformization theory of Poell et al. (2019) by suggesting to pay special attention to the nature of work, in general and within entrepreneurial ventures, being influenced by, and constructed within the frame of digital platforms. Third, this research has systematically opened up a new venue to reconsider and re-evaluate the field of media entrepreneurship, responding this way to Khajeheian's (2020) call for considering the unique role of digital platforms in the field in order to move this research domain forward innovatively within a digitalized business ecosystem.

8.3. Suggestions for future research

Using the typologies introduced in Table 2, future researchers might, for instance, address which stages the platformization process undergoes and which varying effects such process has when different platforms, i.e. financial vs. labor platforms, are applied separately within the context of media entrepreneurship. While in this study we have applied the platformization framework only to reorganize research in the field of media entrepreneurship, it would be very insightful for future research to try to combine this framework with other theoretical lenses such as the dynamic capabilities theory, the transactions costs and/or sensemaking approach, preparing the ground for more innovative contributions in the field.

Future researchers interested in the field of media entrepreneurship are also encouraged to conduct empirical studies based on the platformization framework. This would help to more precisely understand the influence of digital platforms in those domains and thus help media entrepreneurs in their decision-making processes. In this respect, the system dynamics approach could be applied. Thanks to the application of advanced equations that some sophisticated computer softwares such as Vensim allow (see Saraji & Sharifabadi, 2017), this approach could address the interactions and effects between various pre-determined factors while taking a vast amount of variables simultaneously into account. Such approach may be used for modelling media entrepreneurship in a digitalized business ecosystem.

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