International Journal of Cultural Studies
1–18


Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/13678779241292736
journals.sagepub.com/home/ics


Platforms and Cultural Production

Global perspectives on platforms and cultural production

Thomas Poell
University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

Brooke Erin Duffy
Cornell University, USA

David B. Nieborg
University of Toronto, Canada

Bruce Mutsvairo
Utrecht University, Netherlands

Tommy Tse
University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

Arturo Arriagada
Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, Chile

Jeroen de Kloet
University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

Ping Sun
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China

Corresponding author:
Thomas Poell, University of Amsterdam, Turfdraagsterpad 9, 1012 XT Amsterdam, Netherlands.
Email: Poell@uva.nl

Abstract

Research on platforms and cultural production is dominated by studies that take the Anglo-American world and Northwestern Europe as their main points of reference. Central concepts in the field, consequently, bear the imprint of Western institutions, cultural practices, and ideals. Critically responding to this state of affairs, this opening essay of the special issue on Global Perspectives on Platforms and Cultural Production, consisting of 20 articles, aims to: 1) challenge universalism, 2) provincialize the US, and 3) multiply our frames of reference. Pursuing these objectives, we bring together ideas from postcolonial and decolonial theory and platform studies in a systematic research program. This *global perspectives* program allows us to: denaturalize and rethink dominant concepts and ideas through research from around the globe; explicitly thematize and examine the global power relations that structure platform economies; and critically interrogate the knowledge production about these economies.

Keywords

platforms, cultural production, postcolonial and decolonial theory, challenging universalism, global perspectives

Introduction

Anniversaries have a predictable tendency to elicit critical reflection. And so, with Facebook now in its third decade and YouTube approaching the 20-year mark, it is an apt moment to reflect on the emergent field of 'platform studies'. Our shared interest in cultural production – widely understood as the creation of symbolic goods that contribute to a shared sense of culture – compels us to confront some of the conceptual and empirical problems and gaps in this field.

Most significantly, research on platforms and cultural production has been dominated by studies that take Northwestern Europe and the Anglo-American world – which includes the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia – as their main points of reference (Burgess and Green, 2018; Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Deuze and Prenger, 2019; Leaver et al., 2020; Poell et al., 2021). Central concepts in the field, consequently, bear a strong imprint of Western institutions, cultural practices, and ideals. Research on the US, in particular, has informed how we approach and subsequently theorize the institutional dimensions (e.g., platform economies, infrastructures, and governance), as well as the cultural practices (e.g., labor, creativity, democracy) of platform-based cultural production. However, as the contributions to this special issue demonstrate, we cannot simply *apply* these concepts to cultures of production around the globe. There is bound to be friction between how, for example, platform economies and labor markets are understood from a US perspective and the lived experiences of social media creators in Brazil, Nigeria, or India.

Undoubtedly, research on platform-dependent cultural production in China has seen a marked uptick in recent years. This research has made it possible to contest and complicate the Western interpretation of key concepts, such as platform capitalism and precarity (Craig et al., 2021; Fung et al., 2023; Kaye et al., 2021; Lin and de Kloet, 2019; Steinberg et al., 2022; Zhang, 2021; Zhao, 2019). Not coincidentally, China is also a leading market

for platform companies – second only to the US. The political economy of platforms is, in this regard, reflected in the political economy of knowledge production. Crucially, other parts of the world receive comparatively scant attention, especially from a conceptual point of view.

We present this special issue on Global Perspectives on Platforms and Cultural Production as a critical response to this uneven state of affairs. This opening essay provides the foundations for this response. It begins with a discussion of our three central objectives: 1) challenging universalism, 2) provincializing the US, and 3) multiplying our frames of reference. We then review existing research in this area, which has inspired and informed our efforts. Subsequently, we propose our *global perspectives* program to inform researchers on how to more effectively multiply the frames of reference in platform studies research. We conclude by reviewing how the 20 articles in the special issue, which examine and theorize examples of platform-dependent cultural production from around the world, contribute to this program.

Core objectives

Concerns about Western-dominated research and theory are, of course, by no means novel. Postcolonial and decolonial theorists have long criticized the universalism of Western theory, pointing to the continuation of colonial knowledge-power relations (Chakrabarty, 2009; Chen, 2010; Escobar, 2018; Mignolo, 2012; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1985; Quijano, 2007). Moreover, there have been numerous calls to *decolonize* (Glück, 2018; Karhade et al., 2020; Willems and Mano, 2016) and *de-westernize* (Curran and Park, 2000; Davis and Xiao, 2021; Nyamnjoh, 2010; Takahashi, 2007) media studies and platform studies. In practice, however, the Anglo-American world and Northwestern Europe continue to function as the primary, and often sole, frames of reference.

Thus, our first objective is to challenge Western universalism in platform studies. What makes such universalism especially daunting is its tacit nature. Scholars whose work focuses on the West rarely claim that their observations and concepts have universal applicability. Yet, they certainly do so implicitly by overlooking the *specificity* of the socio-economic and political-cultural configurations in which their insights have been produced. By contrast, researchers who work on Asian, African, and Latin American regions have little choice but to address the specific contexts of their projects; academic journals and reviewers demand this in their uneven appeals for 'context'. In other words, those working outside the charmed circle of the 'West', carry the burden of geopolitical and historical representation (Shohat and Stam, 2014). And the 'Rest' often serves merely as an empirical case study of Western theory.

Even within Europe, we can observe how Eastern and Southern European countries are rarely centers of theory building, while scholars from Northwestern Europe consider their region a legitimate frame of reference. Admittedly, some of our own work can be criticized along these lines. Yet, to overcome universalism, we, as members of a field, need to commit to systematically questioning *where* and *how* central concepts in the study of platforms and cultural production have been developed. Such questioning will inevitably force us to rethink some of these concepts.

Second, following Chakrabarty's (2009) call to 'provincialize Europe', we aim to provincialize the US, which has emerged as the de facto reference point in platform scholarship. This means approaching the US as any other region, rather than as *the* frame of reference for research on platforms and cultural production. To be clear: this call does not imply that we must abandon the use of concepts informed by US scholarship. As Chakrabarty (2009: 5) has also made clear, reflecting on the imperialist European origins of ideas such as 'the human or that of Reason', 'there is no easy way of dispensing with these universals in the condition of political modernity. Without them there would be no social science that addresses issues of modern social justice.' Similarly, we cannot dispense with the concepts of precarity, entrepreneurship, authenticity, creativity, affordance, and diversity in studies on platforms and cultural production, even though many of these concepts carry the imprint of American and European histories and concerns. Instead, we should be attuned to the institutional and cultural baggage carried by such concepts, while simultaneously enriching and complicating these notions, as well as developing new concepts through research from around the globe.

Third, enriching, complicating, and developing theory means multiplying our frames of reference. More detailed research is needed on the specific institutional settings, political economies, infrastructures, and cultural practices in which platforms and cultural producers become entangled in different parts of the world. Crucially, such research should *not* be considered as mere 'case studies', but also as opportunities for theory-building. Why are vibrant cultural industries in Japan, Indonesia, and Kenya not key reference points? We desperately need a richer conceptual vocabulary to do justice to the specific institutions and cultures of platform-based cultural production around the globe.

To be clear, these efforts to challenge Western universalism and diversify the geographies of theory cannot exclusively be the responsibility or territory of Asian, African, or Latin American scholars. We cannot multiply our frames of reference if dominant academic institutions and leading networks of scholars do not explicitly and critically reflect on the specific contexts in which theory is produced. The conceptual playing field needs to be leveled for different theoretical frames to appear as equal *options*, rather than as *alternatives* to universal Western theory (Mignolo, 2012). Such a reorganization of the theoretical landscape is important for *all* scholarship. Universalist theory also prevents scholars from understanding the specificity of cultural production in the US or Europe, while it shuts out research on other parts of the world from the conceptual conversation in leading journals and conferences.

Making these observations, we should acknowledge the highly unequal structures of knowledge production that platform studies researchers face. Leveling the conceptual landscape does not simply happen by creating space for research from around the world. This is first and foremost an institutional question. Top-ranked universities, international scholarly associations, wealthy funding bodies, and leading journals and publishers, primarily established in the US and Northwestern Europe, very much shape the field (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Goyanes and Demeter 2020).

Of course, it is impossible for single individuals to overturn these institutional structures. We can, however, push for change. From our perspective, changing dominant structures means moving away from the academic tendency to claim and protect one's own territory, whether this is a particular approach, theory, concept, or topic of research.

Such intellectual protectionism is an upshot of an institutional culture that incentivizes work in silos. With this special issue, we have instead tried to promote dialogue and collaboration.[1]

Decolonizing and de-westernizing media and platform studies

Our pursuit of this project has been inspired by postcolonial and decolonial theory and its critique of modernity. Research in these traditions has demonstrated how modernity and coloniality are inextricably connected (Chakrabarty, 2009; Escobar, 2018; Mignolo, 2012; Quijano, 2007). As the decolonial scholar Escobar (2007: 184) argues, 'the domination of others outside the European core' is a 'necessary dimension of modernity, with the concomitant subalternization of the knowledge and cultures of these other groups' (Escobar, 2007: 184). Similarly, from a postcolonial perspective, Chakrabarty (2009: 43) makes clear that 'Europe's acquisition of the adjective "modern" for itself is an integral part of the story of European imperialism within global history'. Evidently, the idea of the West as modern, with other parts of the world lagging behind, enables the universalism of Western theory. In this regard, the conceptual couples of 'modern and traditional', 'developed and underdeveloped', 'first and third world', 'the West and the Rest' all constitute a continuation of the colonial epistemic order.

Over the past two decades, these critiques have affected the humanities and social sciences at large, leading to efforts throughout a wide range of disciplines to 'decolonize' and 'de-westernize' knowledge production. Such efforts have also been made in media studies and platform studies more specifically. In 2014, Waisbord and Mellado, for example, observed that 'recent writings have moved the issue of "de-westernization" to the forefront in the field of communication' (Waisbord and Mellado 2014: 361). They even call it 'a new mantra in communication scholarship' (Waisbord and Mellado 2014: 361). At the same time, they also found that 'de-westernization may have limited impact in the field at large, finding a receptive audience among scholars and subfields already predisposed to engage with "non-Western" research.' The authors saw de-westernization becoming more of an 'area of specialization', rather than an approach that transforms the discipline overall (Waisbord and Mellado 2014: 370). This is indeed what we are observing in media and communication research today.

Research in this field that actively tries to bring about an epistemic shift shows that such a shift is still urgently needed (Mohammed, 2022; Moyo and Mutsvairo, 2018). Working on decolonizing audience and internet studies, Willems and Mano (2016: 20), for instance, note that 'The project of both de-essentializing audiences and users and provincializing the dominant academic canon is crucial given long-standing stereotypes of African viewers, listeners and users as "primitive" or even "criminal".' In their research, they find that Nigerian internet users are routinely represented in popular discourses as 'advance-fee scammers', while they simultaneously observe how 'visual representations in adverts or documentaries have set up deliberate contrasts between the supposedly "tribal" nature of Maasai people and their "modern" use of a mobile phone' (Willems and Mano, 2016: 20). Willems and Mano emphasize that such images are not new, but 'build on older colonial discourses which have portrayed African audiences as "ignorant" or "gullible"' (Willems and Mano, 2016: 20). Vice

versa, we note that such stereotypes are enabled by universalist theories that present Anglo-American and European internet users as standard, as modern.

Media and communication research also shows, however, that decolonizing or de-westernizing media theory is by no means a straightforward exercise. Examining the proliferation of new media in Africa, Nyamnjoh (2010: 19) points to a central conundrum: 'Is there a danger of either essentializing Africa by treating her as "different", or by ignoring her specificity by approaching her media via Western theoretical constructs?' He argues that the way out of this conundrum is to adopt a 'flexible theoretical position', which 'takes into account the multiple, overlapping spaces and flows in the era of globalization yet refuses to gloss over global power imbalances and material inequalities' (Nyamnjoh, 2010: 20). Such an approach corresponds with our proposal for global perspectives, discussed in the next section. For now, we wish to emphasize the need in platform studies to pay systematic attention to global power imbalances and material inequalities, which structure how platforms connect people and institutions around the world.

The urgency of examining global power relations is also emphasized by Shome (2016) in her reflections on the confrontation between postcolonial studies and media studies, in which she criticizes the de-westernization perspective. The author maintains that 'often calls for "dewesternization," while well-intentioned, shore up a pluralist, additive, logic of international diversity that occludes colonial power relations that link media spheres in the West/North with societies in the non-West/South in unequal ways' (Shome, 2016: 247). She sees such a pluralist approach in line with 'a Western liberal logic that regards nations as discrete unified units' (Shome, 2016: 247). Whether or not this critical depiction of de-westernization efforts is justified, we agree with Shome that a discourse of pluralism and international diversity is not a productive path forward. Instead, we aim to attend to the complex global power relations involved in the platformization of cultural production.

As work in platform studies shows, these power relations have colonial histories, but they are also very much shaped by contemporary political economies. Many studies, not surprisingly, point to the dominance or imperialism of US platforms (Jin, 2015; Poell et al., 2021). Yet, recent research also points to crucial political economic shifts which are taking place in the global political economy of platforms. Over the past decade, Chinese-owned platforms, most prominently TikTok and WeChat, have clearly become of vital importance in cultural production in different parts of the world (Davis and Xiao, 2021; Thussu, 2018). Strikingly, this political economic shift has been accompanied, at least in part, by a conceptual opening of the field of platform studies. As the influence of China is growing, it is becoming increasingly perceived as a legitimate frame of reference, although certainly not on equal footing with the US.

Over the past years, the rise of China has allowed for some important conceptual interventions within the field of platform studies. For example, Steinberg et al. (2022: 1410) have complicated our understanding of 'platform capitalism'. They point out that this notion has most often been associated with the 'data or rentierist models of capital accumulation', which are prominent in the Anglo-American world. Research on so-called 'super apps' in China and other East Asian countries, however, suggests that platform companies, like Tencent, Alibaba, and Kakao, 'are not simply rent-seekers', but that

they also 'occupy real estate, organize labor, deliver infrastructures, negotiate with states and other corporations, regulate the public sphere, and shape the cultural and political environment' (Steinberg et al., 2022: 1410). In light of these observations, the authors propose to treat platform *capitalisms* in the plural (see also Steinberg and colleagues' contribution in this special issue).

Another vital intervention comes from studies that have challenged the Western perspective on 'precarity' in cultural labor, in which platformization is often seen to further undermine job security in the cultural industries (Deuze and Prenger, 2019). Research on rural China and on Ghana provides a quite different perspective (Alacovska et al., 2021; Lin and de Kloet, 2019). In these regions, 'precarity is not a deviation from the norm but a constant and longstanding feature' (Alacovska et al., 2021: 619; see also Chow, 2018). In such economic conditions, platforms do not necessarily intensify precarity but enable 'marginalized individuals' to become 'unlikely creative workers' (Lin and de Kloet, 2019: 10). While such platform-based work is also precarious, it provides economic opportunities and social mobility to those with few other options.

As these examples show, the moment other parts of the world are taken seriously as frames of reference, we can start rethinking central concepts in our field. At the same time, we still have a long way to go in leveling the conceptual playing field. Despite all the calls for decolonization and de-westernization, the just-mentioned studies are still isolated efforts by scholars already committed to bring about an epistemic shift. Moreover, these efforts primarily revolve around highlighting the friction with dominant Anglo-American and European interpretations of key concepts. As such, the West often remains the primary reference point. Given the dominance of Anglo-American theory and the current institutional organization of the field this seems unavoidable. Yet, as we will argue, while Western theory is inevitably the starting point, it cannot be the end point.

Global perspectives

Building on the work in decolonial and postcolonial theory, as well as efforts to translate this work to platform studies, we envision four steps to multiply our frames of reference and develop global perspectives in the study on platforms and cultural production. We call this a *global perspectives* program, as it allows us to: denaturalize and rethink dominant concepts and ideas through research from around the globe; explicitly thematize and examine the global power relations that structure platform economies; and critically interrogate the knowledge production about these economies.

Step 1: Provincializing and denaturalizing

Our starting points are the central concepts in the field of media and communication, which provide a vital vocabulary to critically examine the entanglements of platforms and cultural production. We argue, in correspondence with Chakrabarty's (2009) engagement with the European intellectual tradition, that we cannot simply jettison the dominant concepts in our field. They allow us to interrogate the social and political implications of platformization. Such research continues to be urgently needed as the development of platforms is legitimized everywhere by a discourse of progress and innovation, while

their socio-economic and political-cultural impact has been both complex and problematic. In addition, the central concepts in the field are very much needed, as processes of platformization constantly cross national and continental boundaries. We must examine and theorize these global connections and interactions from a variety of perspectives, rather than in isolation from more general theoretical debates (Willems, 2014).

Simultaneously, it is crucial, as we have argued throughout this essay, to critically situate how the central concepts in the field have been produced – and by whom. We need to question whether concepts overwhelmingly developed by Anglo-American or European scholars can accommodate the lived realities of platform-based cultural production in other parts of the world. In practice, this means showing the friction between key concepts and the specific ways in which platform-based cultural production takes shape.

To do so systematically, we need to consider both the *institutional* dimensions of platformization, as well as the cultural *practices and imaginaries* that animate this process. In developing the special issue, we have built on the analytical framework, which three of us proposed in earlier work, to comprehensively discuss these dimensions (Poell et al., 2021). Drawing on research from a range of disciplines, we have argued that from an institutional perspective platforms can be understood as multisided markets, computational infrastructures, and governance frameworks. And from a cultural perspective, we have contended that platformization involves shifting practices and imaginaries of labor, creativity, and democracy in the cultural industries. Developing this analytical framework, we have also made clear that platformization does not unfold according to an 'all-encompassing logic' but varies considerably across industry segments and geographic regions (Poell et al., 2021: 13). Nevertheless, our framework, corresponding with the primary research foci of its authors, bears a strong North American and European imprint.

Critically situating this framework, the contributions to this special issue convincingly demonstrate among others how our understandings of platform capitalism, platform governance, and precarity need to be rethought when taking other parts of the world as points of reference. We also realized that this exercise of *provincializing* the dominant conceptual vocabulary can only have a transformative impact on the field, if it is not just about arriving at more precise understandings of platform capitalism in China, India, and Japan, or of labor precarity in Brazil, Turkey, and Slovenia. It must also be accompanied by a *denaturalization* process of Western interpretations of these concepts. For scholars pursuing research on the US or Europe, it should no longer be self-evident that platformization necessarily leads to a precarization of cultural labor or that platform capitalism primarily revolves around data or rentierist models of capital accumulation. Such interpretations are, instead, always situated in wider political economies and cultures.

Step 2: Interreferencing

While the first step is to provincialize and denaturalize the dominant ideas in media and communication, we must go further. The second step should be to multiply our frames of reference beyond the US and Europe. This is in line with Chen's (2010) proposal for interreferencing, which he tied to 'Asia as method'. In Chen's proposal, Asian countries — most prominently China and India — become each other's points of reference.

Building on earlier work by the Japanese scholars Takeuchi (2005 [1960]) and Mizoguchi (1996 [1989]), Chen (2010: xv) argued that 'using Asia as an imaginary anchoring point can allow societies in Asia to become one another's reference points, so that the understanding of the self can be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt.' This is explicitly a political project of 'self-transformation', in which 'a society in Asia may be inspired by how other Asian societies deal with problems similar to its own, and thus overcome unproductive anxieties and develop new paths of engagement' (Chen, 2010: 212).

As our project has a somewhat different aim, we also develop a different approach to interreferencing. From our perspective, this cannot solely be an intra-Asian exercise but must involve other parts of the world. But to move beyond the West as the primary horizon, the focus should be on interreferencing between locations and instances which are often not a reference point. Recent efforts in media and platform studies to examine South-South connections are an important step in this direction. In this special issue, Tse, Zhang, and Van Noord provide an evocative example of such an approach by studying the fashion trade between China and Kenya. Of course, such work does not necessarily have to focus on interconnected institutions and practices, but can more generally revolve around finding surprising correspondences and striking differences. For example, in our special issue, the discussion on the precarity across three regions – Brazil, Turkey and Slovenia – was particularly productive.

Step 3: Disaggregating and reassembling

To overcome universalist theory, we clearly need to develop research and theories sensitive to the specific institutions and cultural practices that shape platform-dependent cultural production. Following Cirolia and colleagues (2023: 1995) who call for new 'theorizing in and from the global South', we believe it is crucial to develop 'theory through case studies'. Such theory-method synchronicity 'allows for an emplaced and contextually responsive analysis of platformization as part of an array of technological, social, political, and spatial dynamics, ecosystems, and arrangements' (Cirolia et al., 2023: 1995).

A focus on place, however, does introduce new challenges. As Maitra and Chow (2015) point out in their reflections on Asia and new media, an emphasis on 'place' carries the specter of cultural essentialism. They write 'while such attention to 'place' is important, an unqualified emphasis on the local or the regional often gives rise to ethnoculturalist approaches that […] tend to overlook differences within these apparently homogeneous spaces' (Maitra and Chow, 2015: 18). Such approaches ascribe inherent or fixed cultural characteristics to specific regions, which are, in turn, used to explain how media technologies are integrated in cultural practices. As Abidin, Lee, and Kaye observe, this tendency is especially pronounced in studies on Asian platforms. They write 'despite its vastness, this region is frequently grouped and reduced into a homogeneous monolithic cultural block of "Chinese culture" in contrast to the "West"' (Abidin et al., 2023: 5). From a similar perspective, Lamarre (2017: 289) observes that 'the paradigm of "media in Asia" treats the platform as a mobile object to which a series of static attributes or cultural qualities may be subjectively added.' For example, this leads studies

on 'mobile media in Korea and Japan' to 'turn into accounts of the Koreanness or Japaneseness of mobile media' (Lamarre 2017: 289).

Such accounts often take the form of methodological nationalism, in which the national state is considered as the primary unit of analysis – that is, a natural container of social processes. While national states still very much shape social activity within their boundaries, patterns of cultural association, economic exchange, and political interaction often do not neatly follow national boundaries. Reflecting on this, Maitra and Chow (2015) suggest there are always internal differences within national boundaries, but also exchanges and connections that overflow these boundaries. Hence, we need to adopt a flexible perspective on geography. As Appadurai (2000: 7) argues, we need a 'process geographies' approach, in which 'significant areas of human organization' are seen 'as precipitates of various kinds of action, interaction, and motion — trade, travel, pilgrimage, warfare, proselytisation, colonization, exile, and the like.' In other words, 'regions are not permanent geographic facts, but problematic heuristic devices' (Appadurai, 2000: 7).

Thus, as a third step, we need to critically interrogate what appears as a frame of reference. Taking this step is especially important in platform studies, which is often still characterized by methodological nationalism and regionalism. We thus aim to *disaggregate* such standard perspectives. Instead of assuming specific geographies as self-evident or natural, we are looking to *reassemble* the evolving geographies in which platform-dependent cultural production takes shape. This means tracing a variety of overlapping geographies: national states that regulate, local networks of cultural producers that target globally distributed audiences, platform companies that connect regional advertisers with aggregates of users, and so on. Moreover, it means mapping how such geographies transform over time, as new actors are drawn into such configurations, while others fall away.

Rather than taking entire states or societies as frame of reference, the focus shifts to much more specific, heterogenous configurations of social actors. Such specific configurations can, for example, involve a group of Bangladeshi creators that target South Korean viewers through YouTube (see Kim in this issue), or LGBTQ + creators in Montreal and Berlin, responding to perceived algorithmic bias on Instagram (see Chartrand and Duguay in this issue). It is only through such focused case studies on distributed assemblages of actors that we can identify and theorize differences and correspondences in the reconfiguration of cultural production.

Step 4: Making global power relations explicit

In developing other frames of reference, we need to be careful not to swap one dominant frame with another. Earlier in this essay, we describe how the rise of Chinese platforms has led to new conceptual openings. As China is emerging as potentially a dominant economic and geopolitical force, it is also increasingly taken seriously as an epistemic reference point. Already 10 years ago, Chow and de Kloet (2014: 9) observed that 'the current proliferation of China studies programmes and centers around the world provides a case in point, and hints at a political economy underpinning knowledge production.' Thus, even if we provincialize Europe and the US, 'some localities, languages, local

knowledges and speaking positions are privileged above others' (Chow and de Kloet 2014: 9).

These reflections bring us to our fourth step, making global power relations explicit. We can only level the conceptual playing field, if we are critically aware of the larger political economy in which this field is situated. We want to avoid toothless internationalism, which simply propagates a diversification of research and perspectives. Instead, the analysis needs to be based on the realization that both the configurations in which platforms and cultural production become entangled–as well as the study of these configurations–are fundamentally shaped by systems of power. There is no multiplication of perspectives without questioning the power relations underpinning these perspectives.

Examining power relations, we are first confronted with the global dominance of US-based and to some extent Chinese platform companies. This is never, as the papers in this special issue demonstrate, just an economic question, but also about culture and politics. Norms and values are deeply embedded in the business models, interfaces, and architectures of platforms, which affect how they can be used by cultural producers (Karhade et al., 2020). This is not to say that platforms determine the practices of these producers, which, of course, have an agency of their own. The point of multiplying our reference points is precisely to conceptualize the perspectives and agency of a wider variety of actors, which are not always considered. At the same time, the agency of cultural producers takes shape within unequal power relations, in which some actors, such as large legacy media companies, have more resources and opportunities to negotiate than others. Thus, making power explicit means tracing the distribution of such resources and opportunities, and analyzing what this means for the agency of cultural producers.

This is not just about the relationship with global platform companies. We also need to be attentive to how platform-based cultural production involves relations of dependency and power between, for example, groups of creators and advertisers, or between cultural producers and local and national state regulators. Questions of access to infrastructure and resources, issues of labor precarity, and struggles over freedom of expression are often more so shaped by 'local' or 'regional' actors, than by global platform companies.

To complicate matters further still, we need to remain aware that these supposedly local and regional relations are embedded in global systems with historically fraught relations of power. Let us take, for instance, the precarity of platform-based cultural work. Yes, we can observe that the precarity of this work has a different meaning when the overall economy is characterized by instability and a lack of social security. Yet, in making such observations, it is equally vital to acknowledge – as postcolonial and decolonial scholars have done – that the instability of most economies around the world is the result of historical forms of violence and exploitation, as well as the continued assault of contemporary neoliberal politics.

Finally, studying and theorizing such distributed power relations, we need, as a field, to keep in mind that scholars are doing this work within highly skewed economies of knowledge production. While this point has been made many times before, it bears repeating. Conference organizers, journal editors, funding agencies, and reviewers need to be acutely aware that this is an epistemic struggle for the legitimacy of other perspectives and other conceptual questions. If we are serious about supporting the less privileged in this struggle, we should more actively provide space and support for

conceptual work that builds on other reference points. And we need to encourage scholars to cite work that supports the construction of such frames, rather than pointing them back to Anglo-American and European scholarship. This is not about diversity for diversity's sake, but about growing a field of media and communication that is more attuned to the lived realities in which technology and culture become entangled around the globe.

Special issue

In this final section, we review how the 20 articles in this special issue contribute to this mission. We have organized this discussion along the different dimensions of platformization, starting with the *institutional relations* of markets and governance. Subsequently, we will focus on the contributions that examine *cultural practices*, thematizing labor and precarity, and resistance, negotiations, and participation. Finally, we will look at the contributions that argue for *situated epistemologies*.

Platform markets and governance

In their short intervention, Steinberg, Mukherjee, and Zhang complicate our thinking about platform capitalism – or as the authors emphasize 'platform capitalisms'. Focusing on China, India, and Japan, they show that the state in these countries has taken a very central role in mediating platform capitalisms, increasingly becoming platform operators. The article successfully conceptualizes state-platform relations in these countries as points of reference.

In turn, Prey and Lee, also in a short reflection paper, use research on the music industry in South Korea, the Netherlands, and Nigeria to demonstrate that there are 'structurally distinct models of platformization' beyond the dominant Anglo-American markets. They identify three variables to explain these models. This intervention provides a compelling example of interrefencing within the specific context of cultural production.

The following full-length papers explore the institutional dimensions of platformization through new empirical research. Kim examines 'Team Azimkiya', a Bangladeshi YouTube channel, that primarily targets South Korean viewers, who generate more revenue because they have a higher 'CPM', or cost per 1000 advertising impressions, compared to Bangladeshi viewers. This strategy, which involves moments of 'self-Orientalization', is theorized as 'global CPM arbitrage'. Thus, the article complicates traditional perspectives on the geography of media production and audiences.

Munoriyarwa and colleagues, building on 36 interviews with beneficiaries of the Google New Initiative (GNI) in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, enrich our understanding of so-called 'philanthrocapitalism'. Contrary to popular belief, GNI falls short of enhancing technological innovation in the media sector across these regions. Yet, the strategy does increase dependence on US-based tech companies. As such, they interpret this form of philanthropy, contributing to our efforts to make global power relations explicit, as a mode of digital colonialism.

The two final articles in this section turn to the governance of platform-based cultural production. Ye, Huang, and Krijnen propose the notion of 'playful governance' to capture how Chinese social media platforms use fictional human characters or animated

figures to communicate their rules to the creator community. Focusing on Douyin, the authors, much like Steinberg and colleagues, highlight the importance of the state in constructing the horizon of cultural production on platforms. In doing so, they draw attention to a different state-platform relationship than can be found in the US and Europe.

Examining the working experiences of Turkey's television drama makers on streaming platforms, Bulut makes a similar move. He too highlights the importance of the state in regulating and shaping creative imaginaries and labor practices on platforms. Furthermore, he proposes the notion of 'platform ambiguity' to understand how in this configuration, platforms both restrain and enable cultural producers.

Labor and precarity

Turning to questions of labor, Caminhas, drawing on 15 interviews with cisgendered female cammers in Brazil, criticizes the traditional understanding of platform-based cultural work as precarious. She points out that this conclusion stems from normative ideas about standard work, which do not correspond with cultural labor in the majority world. To retain the analytic value of 'precarity', Caminhas argues that it needs to be situated within specific economies and derive its meaning from how the workers experience their work.

A similar perspective is developed by Bidav, who, drawing upon an in-depth analysis of Turkish YouTubers, calls for greater attention to the localized dimensions of creator insecurity: from language and governance regimes to staggeringly different CPM rates. In addition to these formal mechanisms, the examined creators are beholden by norms about culturally sensitive issues such as alcohol use and LGBTQI content. In the light of these observations, Bidav introduces the concept of 'localized precarity'.

Another localized perspective on precarity is presented by Lukan, who examines the agency of influencers in Slovenia. Discussions about precarity and agency frequently chalk up uneven power dynamics to conditions of platform dependence. Lukan, however, argues that the influencers she interviewed exhibit a state of indifference to the fluctuations of Instagram, TikTok, YouTube—or what she terms 'platform lethargy'. Instead, their work dynamics and risk management are significantly influenced by familial connections.

The article by Arriagada and Craig continues the discussion on working experiences, by examining Latin American influencers in the United States. Their research further complicates the geographies of platform-dependent cultural production. Despite global imaginations of creator economies, the Latin American influencers in this study struggle to navigate different markets and audiences, constrained by linguistic, regional, and socio-cultural norms.

Nayaka and colleagues, in turn, investigate the appropriation of social media for creative work in the rural hinterlands of South India. As their paper shows, content creators are reshaping how rural communities communicate and collaborate online. A new generation of creators use YouTube as a launchpad to produce creative content, while leaving more institutionally embedded jobs behind.

Though the concept of 'platformization' has witnessed an astonishing uptick in recent years, its usage in the context of work and labor has been rather imprecise. To redress

such imprecision, Gandini and colleagues draw on 60 interviews in 15 European countries to analyze neo-craft work. They stress that cultural work can get 'platform-*ised*' when social relations are repurposed in a specific context to become relations of production. Platform mediation is central to this process, but it should also be situated in post-industrial Europe.

Resistance, negotiations and participation

The second set of research articles that examine cultural practices address the public, democratic side of platform-based cultural production.

Karhawi and Grohmann do so through a close analysis of the discourse of three Brazilian, Marxist cultural producers —'one woman and two drag queens'— on YouTube, Instagram, and X. They conceptualize what they call 'struggling with platforms', which refers to the ways these Marxist producers navigate the tension between engaging in class struggle and the constraints imposed by platforms. Developing this concept, the authors stay away from treating their research participants as unique, 'struggling with platforms' occurs everywhere, while, simultaneously, understanding their struggles in relation to far-right dominance on social media in Brazil.

Tensions between platforms and creators from marginalized communities are also the focus of Chartrand and Duguay's article. They examine how concerns about shadowbanning and algorithmic bias among LGBTQ + Instagrammers in Montreal and Berlin impact their content and communication practices. They offer the concept of 'participatory resignation' to describe how marginalized communities exhibit resilience – remaining on the platform despite discriminatory experiences. Their analysis identifies both shared concerns and differences in how creators express themselves in the two political settings.

Using Nigerian content creator Olalekan Olaleye as a point of departure, Adeoba and Yéku contribute to this discussion by examining the relationship between commercial US-based social media platforms and citizenship practices in Nigeria. They show that despite the American origins and for-profit character of these platforms, they do enable novel aesthetic expressions which are giving new meanings to cultural netizenship. Their findings show citizens appropriating digital platforms to demonstrate expressions of dissent through popular culture.

Finally, Tse, Zhang, and van Noord explore China's cultural and economic influence in Kenya through two Chinese-invested e-commerce platforms, using fashion as a case study. They examine how cultural differences are mediated and negotiated, highlighting challenges in datafication, trust, and logistical barriers. Their findings reveal the complexities of geographies of platformization, as well as of China's expanding soft power in a South-South context.

Situated epistemologies

The special issue closes with a set of papers that reflect on larger epistemological questions.

In a short intervention, Girginova highlights the limitations of English-language research on the metaverse, which often takes Horizon Worlds, Meta's US-centric metaverse prototype, as its starting point. She emphasizes that the current range of metaverse imaginaries is unstable and that the future is far from settled. Therefore, scholars are encouraged to shift their focus from Meta's hype cycle to international developments and imaginaries.

Burgess and colleagues, in their short reflection piece, also expand the conceptual conversation about novel technologies. Focusing on the notion of diversity, they look for inspiration across disciplines. Starting with a review of computer science publications on media recommender systems, they find that these systems are designed to ensure that diversity does not offset the perceived 'accuracy' of suggested content. Yet, such designations, the authors point out, are scarcely brought into dialogue with notions of diversity from cultural studies literature, which has devoted a lot of attention to representational and geographic diversity. Hence, this would be a productive point of overlap and dialogue.

Yuan, in turn, critically engages with the epistemological limits of Anglo-American celebrity/creator studies research, which primarily focuses on the issues of labor, precarity, and creator agency. She expands our conception of cultural production and the process of intermediation by zooming in on two context-specific cases of virtual celebrity in China. These case studies show that cultural agents can fulfill similar functions as digital platforms, controlling resources and facilitating interactions between producers and users.

Finally, Siles and colleagues examine the research on platforms and algorithms in Latin America. Crucially, they focus on research published in Portuguese or Spanish. They observe that part of this research applies Anglo-American concepts to Latin American realities, which they call 'tropicalization'. Yet, there is also context-specific research that questions dominant theories. They end by stressing the importance of research and theory building that engages with the realities and issues of Latin America.

Conclusion

We close by emphasizing that the desired epistemic shift propagated by postcolonial and decolonial scholars will only take place if Anglo-American and European scholars start developing more self-reflexive conceptual practices, understanding the industries, economies, governance frameworks, and practices they study as *specific*. Certainly, over the past years, we have seen some conceptual openings in the field of media and communication, as Chinese platforms and economies have gone through a rapid growth. While this has generated opportunities to question Western conceptual perspectives, it can also be seen as one form of domination replacing another, one being complicit with the alleged 'Rise of China'. Consequently, it is not just important to multiply our frames of reference, but also to critically question the political economy that underpins these frames. Such questioning is especially vital as this political economy largely mirrors the power relations in the platform economy.

In this essay, we have proposed a few steps on how to get to a more equitable political economy of knowledge production. In isolation these steps are not new. For example, in

1978 Said already interrogated global relations of power and knowledge in his famous *Orientalism*. Our contribution is to bring ideas from postcolonial and decolonial theory and platform studies together in a systematic program to develop global perspectives on platform-based cultural production. We hope our efforts will inspire colleagues to produce more vibrant conceptual debates on how platforms and culture become entangled. The papers in this special issue certainly provide ample examples of the gains that can be made.

Funding

The development of this special issue has been generously supported by Global Digital Cultures, an interfaculty research priority area of the University of Amsterdam.

ORCID iDs

Thomas Poell https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3664-2588
Arturo Arriagada https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0226-6107

Note

1. To facilitate this, we have organized a two-day workshop in which the full drafts of all papers were extensively discussed with all contributors. Only after this intensive round of feedback and subsequent revisions were the papers sent out for double-blind peer review through the journal. Looking at the 20 papers in this special issue, we feel this collaborative process has greatly paid off in terms of conceptual contributions and connections between papers.

References

Abidin C, Lee J and Kaye DBV (2023) Introduction to the Media international Australia special issue on 'TikTok cultures in the Asia Pacific'. *Media International Australia* 186(1): 3–10.

Alacovska A, Langevang T and Steedman R (2021) The work of hope: Spiritualizing, hustling and waiting in the creative industries in Ghana. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 53(4): 619–637.

Appadurai A (2000) Grassroots globalization and the research imagination. *Public Culture* 12: 1–19.

Burgess J and Green J (2018) *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*. Cambridge: Polity.

Chakrabarty D (2009) *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chakravartty P, Kuo R, Grubbs V, et al. (2018) #Communicationsowhite. *Journal of Communication* 68(2): 254–266.

Chen KH (2010) *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Chow YF (2018) *Caring in Times of Precarity: A Study of Single Women doing Creative Work in Shanghai*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chow YF and de Kloet J (2014) The spectre of Europe: Knowledge, cultural studies and the 'rise of Asia'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17(1): 3–15.

Cirolia LR, Sitas R, Pollio A, et al. (2023) Silicon Savannahs and motorcycle taxis: A Southern perspective on the frontiers of platform urbanism. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 55(8): 1989–2008.

Craig D, Lin J and Cunningham S (2021) *Wanghong as Social Media Entertainment in China*. New York: Palgrave macmillan.

Cunningham S and Craig D (2019) *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York: NYU Press.
Curran J and Park MJ (2000) *De-Westernizing Media Studies*. New York: Routledge.
Davis M and Xiao J (2021) De-westernizing platform studies: History and logics of Chinese and US platforms. *International Journal of Communication* 15: 20.
Deuze M and Prenger M (eds) (2019) *Making Media: Production, Practices, and Professions*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
Escobar A (2007) Worlds and knowledges otherwise: The Latin American modernity/coloniality research program. *Cultural Studies* 21(2-3): 179–210.
Escobar A (2018) *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Fung A, He W and Cao S (2023) Cultural capitals and creative labour of short video platforms: A study of wanghong on Douyin. *Cultural Trends* 32(3): 264–279.
Glück A (2018) De-westernization and decolonization in media studies. In: Cloud D (ed.) *Oxford Encyclopedia of Communication and Critical Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Goyanes M and Demeter M (2020) How the geographic diversity of editorial boards affects what is published in JCR-ranked communication journals. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 97(4): 1123–1148.
Jin DY (2015) *Digital Platforms, Imperialism and Political Culture*. London: Routledge.
Karhade P, Kathuria A, Dasgupta A, et al. (2020) Decolonization of digital platforms: A research agenda for GREAT domains. In: *Workshop on E-Business*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 51–58.
Kaye DBV, Chen X and Zeng J (2021) The co-evolution of two Chinese mobile short video apps: Parallel platformization of Douyin and TikTok. *Mobile Media & Communication* 9(2): 229–253.
Lamarre T (2017) Platformativity: Media studies, area studies. *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 4(3): 285–305.
Leaver T, Highfield T and Abidin C (2020) *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Lin J and de Kloet J (2019) Platformization of the unlikely creative class: Kuaishou and Chinese digital cultural production. *Social Media and Society* 5(4).
Maitra A and Chow R (2015) What's 'in'? Disaggregating Asia through new media actants. In: Hjorth L and Khoo O (eds) *Routledge Handbook of New Media in Asia*. London: Routledge, 17–27.
Mignolo W (2012) *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Mizoguchi Y (1996 [1989]) *China as Method*. Beijing: Chinese People's University Press.
Mohammed WF (2022) Dismantling the western canon in media studies. *Communication Theory* 32(2): 273–280.
Moyo L and Mutsvairo B (2018) Can the subaltern think? The decolonial turn in media research in Africa. In: Mutsvairo B (ed.) *Palgrave Handbook for Media and Communication Research in Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 26–40.
Nyamnjoh FB (2010) De-westernizing media theory to make room for African experience. In: Wasserman H (ed.) *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa*. London: Routledge, 19–31.
Poell T, Nieborg DB and Duffy BE (2021) *Platforms and Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity.
Quijano A (2007) Coloniality and modernity/rationality. *Cultural Studies* 21(2-3): 168–178.
Said EW (1978) *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. London: Penguin Books.
Shohat E and Stam R (2014) *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. London: Routledge.

Shome R (2016) When postcolonial studies meets media studies. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33: 245–263.
Spivak GC (1985) Can the subaltern speak? Speculations on widow sacrifice. *Wedge* 7(8): 118–131.
Steinberg M, Mukherjee R and Punathambekar A (2022) Media power in digital Asia: Super apps and megacorps. *Media, Culture & Society* 44(8): 1405–1419.
Takahashi T (2007) De-westernizing media studies: A Japanese perspective. *Global Media and Communication* 3(3): 330–335.
Takeuchi Y (2005) *What is Modernity?: Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Thussu DK (2018) *International Communication: Continuity and Change*. London: Bloomsbury publishing.
Waisbord S and Mellado C (2014) De-westernizing communication studies: A reassessment. *Communication Theory* 24(4): 361–372.
Willems W (2014) Provincializing hegemonic histories of Media and communication studies: Toward a genealogy of epistemic resistance in Africa. *Communication Theory* 24(4): 415–434.
Willems W and Mano W (2016) Decolonizing and provincializing audience and internet studies: Contextual approaches from African vantage. In: Willems W and Winston M (eds) *Everyday Media Culture in Africa: Audiences and Users*. London: Routledge, 1–25.
Zhang Z (2021) Infrastructuralization of Tik Tok: Transformation, power relationships, and platformization of video entertainment in China. *Media, Culture & Society* 43(2): 219–236.
Zhao EJ (2019) *Digital China's Informal Circuits: Platforms, Labour and Governance*. London: Routledge.

Author biographies

Thomas Poell is a professor in Data, Culture, and Institutions at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Brooke Erin Duffy is an associate professor in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Media Studies at Cornell University, United States.

David B. Nieborg is an associate professor in Media Studies at the University of Toronto, Canada.

Bruce Mutsvairo is a professor in Media, Politics and the Global South at Utrecht University, Netherlands.

Tommy Tse is an associate professor in Television and Cross-Media Culture at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Arturo Arriagada is an associate professor in Communication at Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, Chile.

Jeroen de Kloet is a professor in Globalisation Studies at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Ping Sun is an assistant professor in Journalism and Communication Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China.