

Platforms and News

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Book Review: Merja Myllylahti (2023) *From Paper to Platform: How Tech Giants are Redefining News and Democracy*, Bridget Williams Books (185 pages).

In many countries, advertising-supported mass media news distribution is collapsing as social media corporations predominate. In 2023, 65 percent of total global advertising expenditure was digitally based and dominated by search and social media giants (Flew et al, 2023). The *Who Owns the UK Media* report from the Media Reform Coalition at Goldsmiths Leverhulme Research Centre found that Alphabet/Google and Meta/Facebook held “almost monolithic control over online advertising, user data, content distribution and news creation—amounting to an unprecedented concentration of ownership in the online media supply chain” (Chivers, 2023). Across print, radio and television news businesses, major layoffs and closures have unfolded. For New Zealand communications scholar, Merja Myllylahti, these fundamental trends are entangling media organisations with platforms and reshaping the nature of news. Social media and search engines are becoming conduits for news consumption. In 2023, 45 percent of New Zealanders used social media as a source of news, alongside traditional broadcasters and publishers. Alphabet/Google was the most visited website nationally, and its video platform YouTube delivered commonly used news content. Meta/Facebook services were also a primary source of news. And, as social media and search engines drove online traffic to news websites, the latter’s dependence on platforms increased. Platforms offer news media companies tools to search or track audiences and to post for new subscribers. However, as Myllylahti points out, such tools “are also tied more tightly to platforms and their services” (p. 33). Platform coding technologies, business models and cultural conventions shape the distribution of journalism. Meanwhile, platforms themselves operate as publishers of digital news for online news audiences. They exercise control over what people see while moderating, recommending and curating content primarily through algorithms. Major platforms, Meta/Facebook and Alphabet/Google aggregate news and information which is regularly delivered to a public audience.

Unlike news media organisations, platforms are not designated publishers subject to formal regulations or officially lodged complaints. To obscure this double standard, social media corporations self-promote as patrons of journalism. Myllylahti cites numerous examples. During 2021, Google News Initiative provided 7,000 plus news organisations in over 120 countries more

than US\$300 million. In 2022, this initiative and the Meta Journalism Project helped sponsor the International Journalism Festival in Italy. Alphabet/Google has also partnered with arts and culture institutions worldwide, including Te Papa Tongarewa Museum, Auckland Art Gallery and Auckland War Memorial Museum in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Meta's Facebook Journalism Project has helped Māori, Pasifika and mainstream news publishers to develop audience/user revenue initiatives including paywalls, digital marketing programmes and technology investments. Notwithstanding the journalistic benefits of particular projects or programmes, patronage operations generally advance platform power. As Myllylahti observes, if Meta/Facebook changes its algorithms in a certain way, traffic to news sites will diminish sharply. Platform funding may assist established news organisations at the expense of others. Further, such funds may cease after a given time period, to be directed elsewhere. As indicated, patronage serves to deflect attention from actual platform objectives—avoiding designation as publishers, profiteering from market dominance and resisting regulation. However, the considerable platform power of Alphabet/Google and Meta/Facebook cannot be hidden easily. The argument that they should compensate news publishers for use of their content has gained political traction. From 2021 to 2023 inclusive, the collective right of negotiation with social media corporations was established, to varying degrees, in the European Union, the US, Canada, India, Brazil and Australia. In the latter case, the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code Bill was passed by the Federal Parliament in February 2021. An initial deal between Alphabet/Google and NewsCorp in Australia and the US was, eventually, accompanied by funding provisions for other news media companies and regional news publishers.

In the Aotearoa-New Zealand context, Myllylahti points to a cluster of voluntary bargaining arrangements in the absence of a legislatively backed news bargaining code. In May 2022, 28 members of the New Zealand News Publishers Association (NPA) were pursuing payment from Meta/Facebook and/or Alphabet/Google. New Zealand Media and Entertainment (NZME), owner of the Auckland-based *New Zealand Herald*, negotiated separate arrangements with the big two. In December 2022, Alphabet/Google announced signed payment agreements with 23 national publishers. By March 2023, 25 news publishers had made content payment deals with Google News Showcase. The plans for legislatively mandated compensation have not materialised fully. The Fair Digital News Bargaining Bill of August 2023 would have given the Broadcasting Standards Authority a statutory framework for overseeing a news bargaining code designed to facilitate negotiated agreements between news publishers and platform operators. With the election of a National-led government in October 2023, the bill stalled and was unaddressed. If reactivated it may not deliver outcomes much beyond the current voluntary arrangements. In any event, the future of news provision and journalism is precarious. At the time of writing, news programme closures throughout the commercial television sector attest to the collapse of mass media business models and the structural predominance of major platforms.

What then of democracy? In a chapter entitled 'Promoting or Preventing the Spread of Content', Myllylahti explains that social media and search engine business models, without regulation, encourage disinformation, misinformation and hate speech. Massive volumes of inaccurate, fabulist and harmful material circulate instantaneously. As algorithms become the new gatekeepers, factually sourced and accurate journalism is overwhelmed. Alphabet/Google and Meta/Facebook do not adequately monitor their platforms and networks. How this might affect democratic processes and institutions deserved further analysis. I would welcome consequent research on this subject. In

the meantime, one concludes from this succinctly compiled work that small democracies and their media institutions are especially vulnerable to the commercial power of platform behemoths.

References

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