Article

The politics of 'platforms'

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Abstract
Online content providers such as YouTube are carefully positioning themselves to users, clients, advertisers and policymakers, making strategic claims for what they do and do not do, and how their place in the information landscape should be understood. One term in particular, 'platform', reveals the contours of this discursive work. The term has been deployed in both their populist appeals and their marketing pitches, sometimes as technical 'platforms', sometimes as 'platforms' from which to speak, sometimes as 'platforms' of opportunity. Whatever tensions exist in serving all of these constituencies are carefully elided. The term also fits their efforts to shape information policy, where they seek protection for facilitating user expression, yet also seek limited liability for what those users say. As these providers become the curators of public discourse, we must examine the roles they aim to play, and the terms by which they hope to be judged.

Key words
discourse, distribution, Google, platform, policy, video, YouTube

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

> The YouTube team has built an exciting and powerful media platform that complements Google's mission to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful,' said Eric Schmidt, Chief Executive Officer of Google. . . .

> 'By joining forces with Google, we can benefit from its global reach and technology leadership to deliver a more comprehensive entertainment experience for our users and to create new

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opportunities for our partners,' said Chad Hurley, CEO and co-founder of YouTube. 'I'm confident that with this partnership we'll have the flexibility and resources needed to pursue our goal of building the next-generation platform for serving media worldwide.' (YouTube, 2006a)

A few months later, YouTube made a slight change to the paragraph it uses to describe its service in press releases. This 'website', 'company', service', 'forum' and 'community' was now also a 'distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small' (YouTube, 2007c).

Intermediaries like YouTube and Google, those companies that provide storage, navigation and delivery of the digital content of others, are working to establish a long-term position in a fluctuating economic and cultural terrain. Like publishers, television networks and film studios before them, established companies are protecting their position in the market, while in their shadows, smaller ones are working to shore up their niche positions and anticipate trends in the business of information delivery.

YouTube's dominance in the world of online video makes them one of just a handful of video 'platforms', search engines, blogging tools and interactive online spaces that are now the primary keepers of the cultural discussion as it moves to the internet. As such, again like the television networks and trade publishers before them, they are increasingly facing questions about their responsibilities: to their users, to key constituencies who depend on the public discourse they host, and to broader notions of the public interest. Specific disputes, particularly about intellectual property and privacy issues (Grimmelmann, 2007), have spurred bursts of rulemaking that are beginning to establish protections and obligations for these content intermediaries.

In the context of these financial, cultural and regulatory demands, these firms are working not just politically but also discursively to frame their services and technologies (Gillespie, 2007; Sterne, 2003). They do so strategically, to position themselves both to pursue current and future profits, to strike a regulatory sweet spot between legislative protections that benefit them and obligations that do not, and to lay out a cultural imaginary within which their service makes sense (Wyatt, 2004). In this article I will highlight the discursive work that prominent digital intermediaries, especially YouTube, are undertaking, by focusing on one particular term: 'platform'. The term 'platform' has emerged recently as an increasingly familiar term in the description of the online services of content intermediaries, both in their self-characterizations and in the broader public discourse of users, the press and commentators.

The point is not so much the word itself; 'platform' merely helps reveal the position that these intermediaries are trying to establish and the difficulty of doing so. YouTube must present its service not only to its users, but to advertisers, to major media producers it hopes to have as partners and to policymakers. The term 'platform' helps reveal how YouTube and others stage themselves for these constituencies, allowing them to make a broadly progressive sales pitch while also eliding the tensions inherent in their service: between user-generated and commercially-produced content, between cultivating community and serving up advertising, between intervening in the delivery of content and remaining neutral. In the process, it is offering up a trope by which others will come to understand and judge them. As a term like 'platform' becomes a 'discursive resting point' (Bazerman, 1999), further innovations may be oriented towards that idea of what that

technology is, and regulations will demand it act accordingly (Benkler, 2003). Moreover, such terms 'institute' a way of being: as Bourdieu (1991: 119) put it, they 'sanction and sanctify a particular state of things, an established order, in exactly the same way that a constitution does in the legal and political sense of the term'. And using the word 'platform' makes a claim that arguably misrepresents the way YouTube and other intermediaries really shape public discourse online.

'Platform'

This discursive positioning depends on terms and ideas that are specific enough to mean something, and vague enough to work across multiple venues for multiple audiences. To call one's online service a platform is not a meaningless claim, nor is it a simple one. Like other structural metaphors (think 'network', 'broadcast' or 'channel') the term depends on a semantic richness that, though it may go unnoticed by the casual listener or even the speaker, gives the term discursive resonance.

I want to begin by highlighting four semantic territories that the word 'platform' has signified in the past, by looking at the Oxford English Dictionary's discussion of the term's etymology. The OED notes 15 different uses, in what I see as four broad categories; the emergence of 'platform' as a descriptive term for digital media intermediaries represents none of these, but depends on all four.

Computational

The computational meaning is itself relatively new, the last of the OED's categories, just one facet of a term that has a rich range of uses and connotations. In a technical context like this, the use of the term 'platform' certainly points specifically to its computational meaning: an infrastructure that supports the design and use of particular applications, be they computer hardware, operating systems, gaming devices, mobile devices or digital disc formats. There were the 'platform wars' of the 1980s, between PC and Mac; we have since witnessed platform wars between competing search engines Google and Yahoo, competing social networks Facebook and MySpace, competing mobile phone environments Apple iPhone and Google Android. The term has also been used to describe online environments that allow users to design and deploy applications they design or that are offered by third parties. An example is Facebook, which in 2007 made public its API (application programming interface) to allow third parties to design PHP or Javascript widgets that users can incorporate into their profiles (Facebook, 2009).

Architectural

The first definition in the OED and the oldest is architectural: 'A raised level surface on which people or things can stand, usually a discrete structure intended for a particular activity or operation' (OED, 2006). In this sense 'platform' has been broadly used to describe human-built or naturally formed physical structures, whether generic or dedicated to a specific use: subway and train platforms, Olympic diving platforms, deep-sea oil rig platforms, platform shoes. This meaning is most directly connected to the etymological

origins of the word itself: in its earliest appearances, the word appeared as two words –
'platte fourme' or a variation thereof – a clear emphasis on the physical shape.

Figurative

From this, the term developed a more conceptual usage, as 'the ground, foundation, or
basis of an action, event, calculation, condition, etc. Now also: a position achieved or
situation brought about which forms the basis for further achievement' (OED, 2006).
Thus we might describe our entry-level job as a 'platform' for climbing the corporate
ladder, and Emerson can complain that 'conversation in society is found to be on a plat-
form so low as to exclude science, the saint and the poet' (cited in OED, 2006). The
material 'platform' for physical industry becomes a metaphysical one for opportunity,
action and insight.

Political

We now refer to the issues a political candidate or party endorses as their 'platform'; this
usage first emerged from the more architectural meaning, referring first to the actual
stage constructed for a candidate to address an audience, from which they would articu-
late their political beliefs (hence the International Platform Association, formed by
Daniel Webster and Josiah Holbrook in 1831, to celebrate the art of oration). The term
eventually drifted from the material structure to the beliefs being articulated. Puritan
ministers in colonial New England could issue their statement on the governance of the
church as 'The Cambridge Platform' in 1648; in 2008 the US Democratic and Republican
parties could support their respective presidential candidates by publishing their party
platforms – for the 2008 Republicans, 'a platform of enduring principle, not passing
convenience'. We still sometimes refer to individual political positions as 'planks', or
ask where a candidate 'stands' on an issue, subtle reminders of the term's legacy.
Curiously, a term that generally implied a kind of neutrality towards use – 'platforms' are
typically flat, featureless and open to all – in this instance specifically carries a political
valence, where a position must be taken.

All four of these semantic areas are relevant to why 'platform' has emerged in reference
to online content-hosting intermediaries and, just as important, what value both its speci-
ficity and its flexibility offer them. All point to a common set of connotations: a 'raised
level surface' designed to facilitate some activity that will subsequently take place. It is
anticipatory, but not causal. It implies a neutrality with regards to the activity, though less
so as the term gets specifically matched to specific functions (like a subway platform), and
even less so in the political variation. A computing platform can be agnostic about what
you might want to do with it, but either neutral (cross-platform) or very much not neutral
(platform-dependent), according to which provider's application you would like to use.

Drawing these meanings together, 'platform' emerges not simply as indicating a func-
tional shape: it suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support
those who stand upon it. Even the architectural version suggests gaining a vantage point:
'Platform, in Architecture, is … a kind of Terrass Walk, or even Floor on the Top of the

Building; from whence we may take a fair Prospect of the adjacent Gardens or Fields' (Harris, cited in OED, 2006). Subway platforms allow riders to step directly on to the train, instead of loitering below among the dangerous rails. But the 'platform' is defined not just by height, but also by its level surface and its openness to those hoping to stand upon it. Even in its political context, where the 'platform' by definition raises someone above the rest (and is rarely used to describe the beliefs of ordinary citizens), the term retains a populist ethos: a representative speaking plainly and forcefully to his constituents. In any of 'platform''s senses, being raised, level and accessible are ideological features as much as physical ones.

In the discourse of the digital industries, the term 'platform' has already been loosened from its strict computational meaning. Through the boom and bust of investment (of both capital and enthusiasm), 'platform' could suggest a lot while saying very little. Microsoft, as just one example, regularly referred to Windows Media as a 'platform' (Microsoft, 2000a), developed a 'Commerce 'platform' (Microsoft, 1999), described the '.Net' web services, their move to internet computing, as a 'platform' (Microsoft, 2000b), signaled their embrace of mobile devices by rebranding Windows CE as the 'Media2Go platform' (Microsoft, 2003), and unveiled the 'next-generation online advertising platform, MSN adCenter' (Microsoft, 2005) in 2005 – as well as consistently using the term in the more traditional computational sense to describe the Windows operating system.[1] In fact, nearly every surge of research and investment pursued by the digital industry – e-commerce, web services, online advertising, mobile devices and digital media sales – has seen the term migrate to it. Though nearly all of these still refer to, if not a computational infrastructure, than at least a technical base upon which other programs will run, certainly the term was already exceeding this semantic boundary.

It should come as no surprise then that the term would again gain traction around user-generated content, streaming media, blogging and social computing. There has been a proliferation of 'platforms' just in online video: the visible ones whose names are known to users, such as YouTube, Veoh, Revver, MTV's Flux and Kaltura, and the invisible ones that are known only to commercial producers looking to stream their content, such as Brightcove, Castfire, Real Media's 'Helix Media Delivery Platform' and Comcast's thePlatform service. These join the blogging platforms, photo-sharing platforms and social network platforms now jostling for attention on the web. It now makes rhetorical sense to use the term to describe a computational service, but detach it from the idea of further software programming. Just as two examples, a recent Pew report cataloguing types of ICT users noted that: 'The advent of Web 2.0 – the ability of people to use a range of information and communication technology as a platform to express themselves online and participate in the commons of cyberspace – is often heralded as the next phase of the information society' (Horrigan, 2007). 'Platforms' are 'platforms' not necessarily because they allow code to be written or run, but because they afford an opportunity to communicate, interact or sell. Describing News Corp's purchase of MySpace in the pages of *Wired*, Jeremy Philips (vice-president) also found the term useful: 'News Corp's traditional media business has two legs: content and distribution,' he says. Then he sketched a circle in between. 'That's where MySpace fits. It's neither one nor the other, though it shares aspects of both. It's a media platform, and a very powerful and adaptable one. Which is why it has such enormous potential' (Reiss, 2006).

Others are helping to put this term into wider circulation. In an attempt to define another term he helped coin, Tim O'Reilly of O'Reilly Media, whose business seems to be discursive as much as anything else, proclaimed that 'Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all the connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform' (O'Reilly, 2005). In classic O'Reilly style, he draws a term from the computational lexicon, further loosens it from the specific technical meaning and layers on to it both a cyber-political sense of liberty and an info-business taste of opportunity. This discursive move is not without its detractors. It is not clear whether Marc Andreessen had O'Reilly in mind when in a blog post he tried to tie the word back to its computational specifics:

> 'platform' is turning into a central theme of our industry and one that a lot of people want to think about and talk about. However, the concept of 'platform' is also the focus of a swirling vortex of confusion … whenever anyone uses the word 'platform', ask 'can it be programmed?' … If not, it's not a platform, and you can safely ignore whoever's talking – which means you can safely ignore 80%+ of the people in the world today who are using the word 'platform' and don't know what it means. (Andreessen, 2007)

Despite Andreessen's objections, this broader meaning of 'platform' is finding purchase.

Users, advertisers, clients

It is the broad connotations outlined earlier – open, neutral, egalitarian and progressive support for activity – that make this term so compelling for intermediaries like YouTube as a way to appeal to users, especially in contrast to traditional mass media. YouTube and its competitors claim to empower the individual to speak – lifting us all up, evenly. YouTube can proclaim that it is 'committed to offering the best user experience and the best platform for people to share their videos around the world' (YouTube, 2006c) and offer its You Choose '08 project as a 'platform for people to engage in dialogue with candidates and each other' (YouTube, 2007a). This more conceptual use of 'platform' leans on all of the term's connotations: computational, something to build upon and innovate from; political, a place from which to speak and be heard; figurative, in that the opportunity is an abstract promise as much as a practical one; and architectural, in that YouTube is designed as an open-armed, egalitarian facilitation of expression, not an elitist gatekeeper with normative and technical restrictions. This fits neatly with the long-standing rhetoric about the democratizing potential of the internet, and with the more recent enthusiasm for user-generated content (UGC), amateur expertise, popular creativity, peer-level social networking and robust online commentary (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Burgess, 2007; Jenkins, 2006). Of course these activities, as well as the services that host them, predate YouTube. But YouTube has been particularly effective at positioning itself as the upstart champion of UGC.

The promise of sites like YouTube, one that of course exceeds but nevertheless has found purchase in a term like 'platform', is primarily focused on ordinary users. The 'You' is the most obvious signal of this, and has itself found broader cultural purchase, but the direct appeal to the amateur user is visible elsewhere. YouTube offers to let you 'Broadcast Yourself', or as they put it in their 'Company History' page, 'as more people

capture special moments on video, YouTube is empowering them to become the broad-casters of tomorrow' (YouTube, 2009a).

This offer of access to everyone comes fitted with an often implicit, occasionally explicit, counterpoint: that such services are therefore unlike the mainstream broadcast-ers, film studios and publishers. Unlike Hollywood and the television networks, who could be painted as the big bad industries, online content seems an open world, where anyone can post, anything can be said. YouTube was distinctly not going to play the role of gatekeeper, nor even curator: it would be mere facilitator, supporter, host. YouTube celebrates videos that go viral, suggesting that their popularity is more genuine because they were not manufactured by its maker or the media industry.

Of course, YouTube's aspirations are greater than being repository for America's fun-niest home videos: it is looking to profit from it. It is important to remember that YouTube is funded almost entirely by advertising (Allen, 2008). This is certainly downplayed in the specific appeal to regular users, especially to the extent that commercial advertising is not a neat ideological fit with the ethos of the participatory web – not to mention that, for the most part, the users generating the content do not enjoy any revenue in return (Cammaerts, 2008; Petersen, 2008; Terranova, 2000, 2004).[2]

YouTube has yet to turn a profit based on its advertising model: an April 2009 report estimated that YouTube would earn $240m in revenue, but against $711m in costs, pri-marily for bandwidth and licensing (Manjoo, 2009). These data have been challenged. But it has long been clear to YouTube that banner ads and sponsored links would by themselves be insufficient. From early on, YouTube has aggressively sought strategic partnerships with professional media companies, to include commercial media content alongside its user-generated submissions.

Although commercial media are still a minority of YouTube's total content, they dom-inate the lists of most popular and most viewed, particularly music videos from major label artists. More than that, most of YouTube's UGC cannot be paired with advertising. Until recently, YouTube only inserted pre-roll or overlay ads into videos from commer-cial partners. Most advertisers are wary of pairing ads with user-generated videos, despite their occasionally massive viral circulation, out of fear of being associated with the wrong content. YouTube also does not want to undercut its defense against copyright complaints by inadvertently profiting from infringing material posted by a user. Commentators have reported that YouTube only pairs ads with 9 percent of the content it streams to US users, which is less than a third of its total traffic (Learmonth, 2009).

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

Curiously, tropes like 'platform' seem to work across these discourses; in fact, the real value of this term may be that it brings these discourses into alignment without them unsettling each other. Using the same terminology they employ to appeal to amateur users, YouTube sells its service to advertisers: 'Marketers have embraced the YouTube marketing platform and [sic] as an innovative and engaging vehicle for connecting with

their target audiences, and they are increasing sales and exposure for their companies and brands in many different ways' (YouTube, 2009d). 'Platform' in its more figurative sense also works as well for media partners. YouTube can promise all of the following, under the rubric of the 'platform':

> YouTube provides a great platform for independent filmmakers to build and grow a global audience for their short films and video projects. (YouTube, 2007b)

> YouTube is a platform for promotional as well as educational videos, and we are honored to partner with PBS as they bring their unique video programming to our 21st century community. (YouTube, 2008b)

> We look forward to partnering with them [Warner Music Group] to offer this powerful distribution platform to our artists and their fans. (YouTube, 2006b)

This is not the promise of free expression YouTube makes to its users, nor is it the computational meaning. Rather, it is a figurative 'platform' of opportunity. In this case, it is a distinctly commercial opportunity: when YouTube added 'click-to-buy' links to retailers like Amazon and iTunes alongside certain videos, a post to the company blog noted: 'This is just the beginning of building a broad, viable eCommerce 'platform' for users and partners on YouTube' (YouTube Team, 2008b). This is increasingly, perhaps always was, a 'platform' from which to sell, not just to speak.

As a web-based host of content with a visible brand presence for users, YouTube may in fact be the exception in the world of online video. Many more intermediaries, rather than setting up sites of their own, instead provide the less visible back-end for streaming video that appears to come directly from the artists, producers, studios or broadcasters. These intermediaries, then, rarely need to speak to users; their rhetorical efforts are entirely for their business clients, typically media producers and advertisers. This business-to-business discourse generally prefers terms like 'solution', 'service', 'infrastructure' or 'experience'. Yet even here, and perhaps even more plainly, 'platform' offers a powerful way to convince advertisers to use them to reach consumers. Brightcove, the current market leader among video streaming services,[3] introduced BrightcoveTV in 2006, designed to compete with YouTube for UGC, but quietly stopped supporting it after a year, and shut it down entirely a year later (Brightcove, 2009b). Now Brightcove is exclusively

> an Internet TV platform. We're dedicated to harnessing the inherent power of the Internet to transform the distribution and consumption of media. Brightcove empowers content owners – from independent producers to major broadcast networks – to reach their audiences directly through the Internet. At the same time, we help web publishers enrich their sites with syndicated video programming, and we give marketers more ways to communicate and engage with their consumers. (Brightcove, 2009a)

Intermediaries must speak in different registers to their relevant constituencies, positioning themselves so as to best suit their interests in each moment (Gieryn, 1999). However, 'platform' unproblematically moves across all three registers, linking them

into a single agenda. For advertisers, YouTube can promise to be a terrain upon which they can build brand awareness, a public campaign, a product launch; for major media producers, it offers a venue in which their content can be raised up and made visible and, even better, pushed to audiences. At the same time, the evocative rhetoric of 'you' and UGC fits neatly, implying a sense of egalitarianism and support, and in some ways even in the political sense, i.e. giving people a public voice (Couldry, 2008). The term offers a seamless link between the discursive registers in which YouTube must speak, even in the same breath: 'Ultimately, the online video experience is about empowerment. Consumers of online video are empowered to be their own content programmers, consuming the relevant mix of mass, niche and personal media they demand. Advertisers are empowered through data to better understand and engage with their audiences. And content owners are empowered, through sophisticated identification tools, to control their content and make smart business decisions with their content' (Hurley, 2008).

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

> A small group of innovators introduce a new technology that has the ability to entertain and engage people on a massive scale. Advertisers willing to risk money on this untested platform are hard to come by. Content owners are reluctant to embrace it for fear of alienating their existing audiences. And experts hail this new platform as signaling the demise of another. As some of you may have guessed, this is not only the story of YouTube. The year is 1941, nearly 70 years ago, and CBS has just launched its new television network amidst cries that it means the death of radio. (Hurley, 2008)

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

Policy

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

As society looks to regulate an emerging form of information distribution, be it the telegraph or radio or the internet, it is in many ways making decisions about what that technology is, what it is for, what sociotechnical arrangements are best suited to help it

achieve that and what it must not be allowed to become (Benkler, 2003; Lyman, 2004). This is a semantic debate as much as anything else: what we call such things, what precedents we see as most analogous and how we characterize its technical workings drive how we set conditions for it (Streeter, 1996).

This is not just in the words of the rulemakers themselves. Interested third parties, particularly the companies that provide these services, are deeply invested in fostering a regulatory paradigm that gives them the most leeway to conduct their business, imposes the fewest restrictions on their service provision, protects them from liability for things they hope not to be liable for and paints them in the best light in terms of the public interest. As Galperin (2004: 161) argues, 'Ideological paradigms … do not emerge *ex nihilo*, nor do they diffuse automatically. There must be vehicles for the creation and transmission of ideas. Several organizations perform this function, among them universities, think tanks, trade groups, companies, government agencies, advocacy groups, and so on. For any policy issue at stake there is no lack of competing paradigms to choose from.'

YouTube's parent company Google, in its newly adopted role of aggressive lobbyist (Phillips, 2006; Puzzanghera, 2006), has become increasingly vocal on a number of policy issues, including net neutrality, spectrum allocation, freedom of speech and political transparency. Sometimes its aim is to highlight the role of some Google service as crucial to the unfettered circulation of information: whether to justify further regulation, or none at all, depends on the issue. In other moments, it is working to downplay its role, as merely an intermediary, to limit its liability for the users' activity. (This is hardly unfamiliar in the regulatory agendas of traditional media distributors: Hollywood studios will demand of Congress stronger copyright laws or trade protections at one hearing, then request that the government stay out of the rating of content, proclaiming the value of deregulation, at the next.)

In this effort to inhabit the middle, rewarded for facilitating expression but not liable for its excesses, Google and YouTube have deployed the term 'platform' as part of their legislative strategy. For example, their representatives have been outspoken in their support of the net neutrality effort. In their policy blog, a Google analyst, Derek Slater, praised a House bill to that effect, saying that 'the bill would affirm that the Internet should remain an open platform for innovation, competition, and social discourse' (Slater, 2008). This idea was repeated in a policy mission statement Google made available just after the election of President Obama (Google, 2008). Notice not only the use of 'platform', here (as with O'Reilly) referring to the entire internet, but also the kinds of beneficial applications it can host: technical, economic and cultural. As with YouTube's careful address to partners, advertisers and users, these three aims are held together by the role Google imagines for itself as a provider of information, eliding any tensions between them.

Google and YouTube have also positioned themselves as champions of freedom of expression, and 'platform' works here too, deftly linking the technical, figurative and political. In response to a request from Senator Joe Lieberman to remove a number of videos he claimed were Islamist training propaganda (a request they partially honored), the YouTube team asserted, 'While we respect and understand his views, YouTube encourages free speech and defends everyone's right to express unpopular points of view. We believe that YouTube is a richer and more relevant platform for users precisely because it hosts a diverse range of views, and rather than stifle debate we allow our users to view all acceptable content and make up their own minds' (Youtube Team, 2008a).

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

Historically, policy debates about emerging technologies and information intermediaries have been marked by key structural and spatial metaphors around which regulation has been organized (Horwitz, 1989). For instance, before their deregulation the telephone companies were bound by two obligations: first, they must act as a common carrier, agreeing to provide service to the entire public without discrimination. Second, they can avoid liability for the information activities of their users, to the extent that they serve as a conduit rather than as producers of content themselves. Both metaphors, common carrier and conduit, make a similar (but not identical) semantic claim as does 'platform'. Both suggest that the role of distributing information is a neutral one, where the function is merely the passage of any and all content without discrimination. Unlike 'platform', there is the implied direction in these terms: bringing information from someone to somewhere. In the age of the 'network', another spatial metaphor that does a great deal of discursive work in contemporary information policy debates, an emphasis on total connectivity has supplanted direction as the key spatial emphasis. But, to the extent that all of these terms figure in such discussions as a means to claim limited liability for the information provided, they are similar tactics in pursuing specific regulatory frameworks (Sandvig, 2007).

The term 'conduit', and more importantly the commonsense meanings it encapsulated, shaped not only telephony, but later policy debates about whether internet service providers could be regulated according to the same framework. Internet service providers (ISPs) sought to enjoy the conduit protections enjoyed by the telephone companies when they lobbied for Section 230 of the Communication Decency Act. With the passage of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), a limited liability was established for both ISPs and search engines: so long as you are a neutral distributor of information and are not aware of specific violations, you are not liable for the violations of users; if made aware of a violation, you must make reasonable efforts to intervene.

YouTube's official policy positions itself squarely inside the DMCA safe harbor (YouTube, 2009b). This has been YouTube's defense strategy in response to infringement suits brought by individual producers whose material was uploaded,[4] and is the central question in the current lawsuit against YouTube brought by Viacom. Viacom asserts not that YouTube engages in copyright infringement (like an individual file-trader) or facilitates copyright infringement (like Napster), but that it does not diligently enough respond to the takedown notices sent by the content companies, and enjoys a financial benefit from the infringement that slips through. Viacom, of course, is careful to work against the metaphoric characterization of 'platform' and conduit; in their court documents, they typically refer to YouTube as a 'distributor' (Viacom, 2007).

Edges

The idea of the 'platform', then, does quadruple duty. It fits neatly with the egalitarian and populist appeal to ordinary users and grassroots creativity, offering all of us a 'raised, level surface'. It positions YouTube as a facilitator that does not pick favorites, with no ulterior motive other than to make available this tidal wave of UGC. Yet the idea of the 'platform' not only elides the presence of advertisers and commercial media producers, it serves as a key term in seeking those businesses and making plain how YouTube can host their content too. Whatever possible tension there is between being a 'platform' for empowering individual users and being a robust marketing 'platform' and being a 'platform' for major studio content is elided in the versatility of the term and the powerful appeal of the idea behind it. And the term is a valuable and persuasive token in legal environments, positing their service in a familiar metaphoric framework as merely the neutral provision of content, a vehicle for art rather than its producer or patron, where liability should fall to the users themselves.

To the degree that information intermediaries like YouTube claim to be open, flat and neutral spaces open to all comers, the kinds of interventions and choices these providers actually do make can be harder to see. But these 'platforms' do have edges. Burgess and Green (2008: 1) suggest that YouTube offers 'patronage' for user expression, noting two sides of this role: 'YouTube Inc can be seen as the "patron" of collective creativity, inviting the participation of a very wide range of content creators, and in so doing controlling at least some of the conditions under which creative content is produced.' These conditions are practical, technical, economic and legal, and they stray far from the hands-off neutrality suggested by the 'platform' rhetoric. YouTube and Google have pursued a specific business model that, while it does not force them to emulate the traditional gatekeeper role of broadcasters and publishers, nevertheless does have consequences for what they host, how they present it and what they need from it. These drive decisions about content, availability, organization and participation (van Dijck, 2009). And the sites these intermediaries provide have distinct technical affordances, designed to serve their particular clients and purposes. Conditions are unavoidable; it is merely a question of what kind of conditions, and with what consequences (Sandvig, 2007).

Whether these interventions are strategic or incidental, harmful or benign, they are deliberate choices that end up shaping the contours of public discourse online. Take, for instance, YouTube's recent announcement (in a blog entry titled 'A YouTube for All of Us') that it would strengthen its restrictions on sexually suggestive content and profanity, by three means: first, the removal of videos deemed inappropriate according to a new standard; second, the assignment of certain videos to the adult category, which limits what under-age registered users can see and requires all users to click an assent to watching objectionable content; third, and most troubling, the institution of technical demotions: 'Videos that are considered sexually suggestive, or that contain profanity, will be algorithmically demoted on our "Most Viewed", "Top Favorited", and other browse pages' (YouTube, 2008a). While a representative of YouTube indicated that these technical demotions are designed to keep prurient (and popular) videos from automatically populating the front page of the site, they nevertheless also shape how videos are found.

The videos will still exist, but will be rendered harder to find; site indexes that purport to represent user judgments will in fact do so only within parameters unknown to users.

The fact that everyone's content is posted and indexed also makes it more readily locatable and identifiable by third parties who might want it removed. This is most apparent in the disputes about copyright infringement: in its eagerness to partner with major media producers, YouTube has provided tools like ContentID, which allows copyright owners to automatically search for audio or video they believe matches their intellectual property and automatically issue takedown notices to those users. In December 2008 and January 2009, for example, Warner Music Group (WMG) sent thousands of takedown notices to YouTube users, in what critics called a 'fair use massacre' (Jansen, 2009; von Lohmann, 2009). The videos targeted were not only copies of WMG-owned works, but also amateur videos using their music in the background, or musicians paying tribute to a band by playing live along with the commercial recording as a backing track (Driscoll, 2009; Sandoval, 2009). WMG could issue so many takedown notices so quickly only by using ContentID. This kind of content fingerprinting, being both easy and oblivious to nuance, encourages these kinds of shotgun tactics. But it is YouTube's complex economic allegiances that compel it to both play host to amateur video culture and provide content owners the tools to criminalize it.

Conclusion

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

However, these terms matter as much for what they hide as for what they reveal. Despite the promises made, 'platforms' are more like traditional media than they care to admit. As they seek sustainable business models, as they run up against traditional regulations and spark discussions of new ones, and as they become large and visible enough to draw the attention not just of their users but of the public at large, the pressures mount to strike a different balance between safe and controversial, between socially and financially valuable, between niche and wide appeal. And, as with broadcasting and publishing, their choices about what can appear, how it is organized, how it is monetized, what can be removed and why, and what the technical architecture allows and prohibits, are all real and substantive interventions into the contours of public discourse. They raise both traditional dilemmas about free speech and public expression, and some substantially new ones, for which there are few precedents or explanations.

We do not have a sufficiently precise language for attending to these kinds of interventions and their consequences. And the discourse of the 'platform' works against us developing such precision, offering as it does a comforting sense of technical neutrality and progressive openness.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   Thanks to Stephen Purpura for this observation.
2   In 2007, YouTube began a revenue-sharing program with select 'YouTube stars', then later opened it to any user applying to be a 'partner' that YouTube approved (YouTube, 2009c.) Approved partners get a cut of the Adsense revenue from ads paired with their videos. YouTube has not been forthcoming about exactly how much revenue it shares; one journalist estimated it as 80 cents per 1000 views, though YouTube then responded that different users get different cuts (Gannes, 2008a; Gannes, 2008b).
3   Brightcove distinguishes between end-user destination sites like YouTube and 'Internet TV platforms' like itself; it claims to have the largest share of this market (Allaire and Berrey, 2007; Brightcove, 2009a; Schonfeld, 2008).
4   See the court documents related to *Tur* v. *YouTube Inc.*, *English Football Association Premier League* v. *YouTube Inc.* and *Grisman* v. *YouTube, Inc.*

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