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Articles

The Future of the Platform Society in Brazil¹

O Futuro da Sociedade de Plataformas no Brasil

El futuro de la sociedad de plataforma en Brasil

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to diagnose the platform society and propose actions that should be implemented over the next ten years in Brazil. An introduction to the topic of digital platforms is made, clarifying some fundamental concepts (data sovereignty and colonialism, datafication, infopower, and algorithmic governmentality). Then, the three central parts of the text are presented: a current diagnosis, perspectives on the future, and some propositions of actions that need to be considered and implemented to face the challenge of platform society in Brazil.

Keywords: Platforms. Brazil. Future. Digital Culture. Power.

Introduction

The objective of this article is to make a diagnosis of the platform society and to propose actions that should be implemented over the next ten years in Brazil. The country is an important player in the consumption of these digital platforms, providing data and generating

¹ This article originates from an oral communication by the author at the event “Technology in Brazil, 2020-2030”, organized by “Ação Educativa Assessoria Pesquisa e Informação”, São Paulo, November 2021.

little innovation, being hostage to large infrastructure platforms. The first part of the article presents a diagnosis of the current situation, discussing its central themes: platformization, datafication, infopower and colonialism, and data sovereignty. The second part looks ahead to the next ten years. The last part presents a proposal to discuss the platform society in Brazil. It is concluded that countries in the Global South, such as Brazil, are suffering from a new data colonialism, that threatens their sovereignty. Urgent action is needed.

Diagnosis of the platform society

Platform society

The challenge posed today by the platform society, with its processes of datafication and algorithmic performativity, inflects the promises of cyberculture in the 1990s (LEMONS, 2002; 2020; 2021b). We are threatened by disinformation, scientific denialism, and political polarization, fueled by the dynamics of surveillance or data capitalism (SRNICEK, 2017; ZUBOFF, 2019) of the platform society (van DIJCK; POELL; de WALL, 2018; van DIJCK; NIEBORG; POELL, 2020; NIEBORG; POELL, 2018). Individual platforms and their ecosystems constitute the infrastructure of today's contemporary society. We can define digital platforms and platformization as, respectively:

(platforms are) (re) programmable digital infrastructures that facilitate and shape personalized interactions between end users and complementarians organized through systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetization, and circulation of data (van DIJCK; NIEBORG; POELL, 2020, p. 4).

A platform is fueled by data, automated and organized through algorithms and interfaces, formalized through ownership relations driven by business models, and governed through user agreements (van DIJCK, POELL, de WALL, 2018, p. 9).

Platformization then refers to the way in which entire societal sectors are transforming as a result of the mutual shaping of online connectors and complementors (van DIJCK, POELL; de WALL, 2018, p. 19).

I use the term “platformization” to refer to the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web and the consequences of the expansion of social media platforms into other spaces online (HELMOND, 2015, p. 5).

The “platform society” does not merely shift the focus from the economic to the social; the term also refers to a profound dispute about private gain versus public benefit in a society where most interactions are carried out via the Internet.

While platforms allegedly enhance personalized benefits and economic gain, they simultaneously put pressure on collective means and public services (van DIJCK, POELL; de WALL, 2018, p. 2).

Digital platforms monitor and control human actions in various domains through datafication for monetization purposes. This new socio-technical regime, therefore, presupposes a broad collection of data that develops in social relations in the realm of nature and the control of knowledge (LEMOS, 2021a).

The platformization of society is driven by datafication and algorithmic actions that expand through learning and the generation of patterns, recommendations, and the induction of behaviors and new activities. The recommendation of information and actions, at the heart of the dynamics of capturing users' attention on platforms, is a disguised coercion in a customized offer. The objective is to keep users on the platforms by predicting and managing future decisions (MAYER-SCHÖENBERGER; CUKIE, 2013, p.28).

Datafication

Datafication is thus configured as a broad domain of data tracking, which is the basis of surveillance capitalism and the constitution of the platform society. It is a new form of neoliberal governmentality.

For Foucault (1986, 2006), governmentality is a system of government and the development of the art of governing. This takes three forms: Self-government (morality), family government (economy), and state government (politics). Drawing a genealogy of the art of governing, Foucault begins with pastoral power (13th - 15th centuries) as a government of behavior (of souls, of people) through the territory's government in the 16th century, reaching the 18th century with the government over the population.

After the second half of the 18th century, the State passes from the regime of the family to that of the population, with statistics as its fundamental technology (which will show patterns regularities...). Mercantilism will establish this new principle of the governance of the State with the idea of the population, that is, with the emergence of biopolitics, of the government of individuals as a whole. It becomes the State's duty to provide and regulate life, exercising biopower through disciplinary and regulatory technologies.

Liberalism will place a limit on the management of the State (which should not intervene too much), instituting a new governmentality that is based on the idea that the market must assume the role of regulator of what is now "civil society." In the 20th century, this will generate what Foucault calls homo economicus. Today, with the hegemonic neoliberalism since the 1980s, the central idea is that the State must be minimal, with the market as a model that will meet the needs of this homo economicus.

In this brief journey, we can see how the current platform society is anchored precisely in this neoliberal governmentality, with algorithms and datafication as disciplinary and regulatory

devices, digital platforms, massive data collection systems (Big Data), and artificial intelligence. (IA). This governmentality can be called “algorithmic governmentality,” which operates through data collection and formatting devices based on mining (data mining), monitoring and surveillance (dataveillance), and profiling (ROUVROY; BERNIS, 2015).

Infopower

The algorithmic governmentality of datafication processes operates through information production and formatting devices. Colin Koopman (2019) calls this informational power created by data formatting strategies that began to take shape in the early 20th century (1920) in the USA and that will form the basis for the information society. Formatting in forms, manuals, guides, standards, and models of behavior creates what Koopman calls an “informational subject” and the basis of the current algorithmic culture that takes this information power for granted (LEMOIS, 2022).

For reasons of sovereignty and regulation, it is urgent to understand (technically and politically) how data is collected, formatted, processed, and generated through models and standards. Infopower, as an informational power, feeds on datafication as a form of governmentality. The issue is essential for contemporary democracies because not understanding how infopower works means leaving aside important constitutive aspects of current processes of algorithmic governmentality. For the author (2019, p. 12), infopower is exercised through formatting that:

(...) shape, constrain, and prepare whatever is collected, stored, processed, refined, retrieved, and redistributed as information. This formatting is rarely neutral. (...) infopower, as a distinctive modality of power deploys techniques of formatting to do its work of producing and refining informational persons who are subject to the operations of fastening.

Colonialism and Data Sovereignty

The process of datafication that feeds the platforms is currently largely ascending, with data migrating from the Global South to the Global North, creating dependency, inhibiting innovation, and producing political and economic vulnerability. Platformization, through datafication formatting as infopower, is established, as we have seen, as the current form of liberal governmentality. It poses many challenges for countries in the Global South, particularly on issues involving (digital) sovereignty and new (data) colonialism (COULDRY; MEJIAS, 2018).

By digital sovereignty, we understand the possibility of a specific person, institution, region, or country having control and using its data in a conscious, autonomous, and independent way. According to Couture and Toupin (2019), sovereignty is a form of independence, autonomy, and control over digital infrastructure, technology, and data. The term digital sovereignty appeared in 2011, and the discussion has grown since 2015, with the sending of data in “clouds”

outside the territorial borders of countries and with the revelation of planetary data surveillance from Snowden's complaints (HUMMEL et al., 2012, p. 13).

Data colonialism weakens sovereignty since it replicates the colonial logic (over people, institutions, regions, or countries) of expropriation, now of data, for economic, political, or industrial control. For Couldry and Mejias (2018), data colonialism corresponds to the exploitation of personal data, similar to that of human beings, natural resources, and territory in historical colonialism. The difference is that the data is not removed but produced with specific profiling, surveillance, and control objectives (of products, people, public or private institutions...).

Therefore, the issue of the platformization of society directly touches our Latin American condition in the so-called Global South because it is here, once again, that we have the colonized pole in this new socio-technical condition. It is urgent to create public policies that consider society's formatting, datafication, and platformization to increase sovereignty, stop data colonialism, develop effective protection mechanisms, and create the capacity for techno-scientific innovation. In the light of the above panorama, the conclusions of this current diagnosis are summarized.

- *Contemporary society is a society of digital platforms.* Platforms constitute the infrastructure of modern life and are, therefore, the launching pad for several other structures (data or otherwise) that will, as a whole, constitute the socio-technical networks that make up the various domains of social life today.
- *Platformization is characterized by a broad domain of tracking data* from users, devices, and other platforms to predict situations, induce actions, and generate new possibilities for offering services and products, affecting social dynamics (through the relationships established between users), the economy (through monetization from the use of systems, which in turn are indicated by data practices collected and analyzed by the platforms), culture (inducing forms of cultural consumption), politics (creating audiences, shaping opinions, producing chains of disinformation...) etc.
- *Private companies control the platform society* through large private conglomerates in the West (USA), such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft, and in the East (China), such as Tencent, Alibaba, or Baidu. We must think about sovereignty and colonialism as data (food for the new economy) migrates from South to North, leaving Big Tech to develop artificial intelligence systems and new business opportunities. Brazil is a major data provider innovative in the global platform society scenario.
- *Platforms' functioning is performative, always open, generative, and asymmetrical.* The actions of different users on the same platform do not have the same consequences. For example, one person's like on a particular piece of information does not have the same weight or will generate the same algorithmic agency as another person's like on the same piece of information, since everything depends on the relationship with recent actions and other data from those users. The platforms' grammar is complex

to propose recommendations and forms of action. In other words, platforms function as performative metatexts and must be understood as such.

- *The platform society constitutes a media public sphere different from the mass public sphere of the 20th century.* The lack of regulation in favor of innovation generates an “algorithmically manipulated mass” of users, commanded by a technocratic bureaucracy managed by an “epistocracy” (those who know the codes and datasets). This structure forms what John Danaher calls an algocracy (2016).
- *There are significant changes in forms of work* (new and traditional), known as the Gig Economy, impacting all areas of human activity - those who work directly on the platforms (company employees), through the platform (depending on the connection, means of production and applications), or those who use them to perform, or enhance, work, such as university professors, for example. Digital platforms now manage all forms of work to a greater or lesser extent. Generative artificial intelligence, such as ChatGPT, is already putting pressure on working conditions.

Scenario in the near future

Below, based on the diagnosis presented, we present a scenario for the near future within ten years.

Platforms will continue to be controlled by large transactional companies and will become, in an even more radical way, the foundation of society. There will be no significant changes in the socio-political dynamics, even if forms of control, regulation, and breaking of monopolies occur. Facebook’s recent change to Meta, investing in metaverses, is a reaction to the pressure that the company has suffered in terms of social responsibility, but also an escape action to create hegemony in other areas, remaining among the Big Five (Alphabet, Apple, Microsoft, Meta, and Amazon).

There will be changes in usage, and we will have more users on certain platforms. At the beginning of the internet, we had Web 1.0, where each service was executed by specific programs (email, Gopher, Web, Usenet, chats, Muds...). Since Web 2.0 in the 2000s, we have seen the fusion of these services into social networking sites that aggregate services (Myspace, Orkut, Facebook). Now, we live with social networking sites and more or less specialized applications such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp... Instagram and TikTok have grown in number of users. Facebook is constantly declining and transforming into a metaverse platform without much clarity yet about what this will mean. Shortly, the trend will be the growth of specialist platforms.

Political polarization will increase, and forms of regulation (self and ad hoc) will tend to grow, as social pressures will increase, especially about protecting personal data, interoperability allowing the use of data between different platforms, surveillance...

Increase in the use of platforms for work and education. This will be the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite connectivity problems and unequal access to equipment, these

systems proved to be stable, performant, and reliable. We will see the emergence of more bottom-up platforms for work in the gig economy (as is already happening for deliveries and transport in several places around the world).

Technobureaucracy will increase with artificial intelligence, data collection, and learning systems combined with Big Data, further expanding algocracy. Municipalities, states, and the federal government will increasingly use artificial intelligence for administration and social control, whether through mobile or internal systems in the management of public affairs. The growth of artificial intelligence systems is inevitable, especially generative artificial intelligence (GAI) such as ChatGPT.

Action Proposals

Below are proposals for immediate actions to be developed to face the problem of the platformization of society in Brazil, considering that it is already underway.

- *Regulation* - With the expansion of the platformization of society, it is essential to think seriously about forms of regulation (self-regulation, state regulation, or co-regulation of platforms, among others). These platforms (individuals or the ecosystem) constitute a new privatized public sphere that must be regulated to guarantee the public interest and the common good. This must include a legal, technological, and educational framework. Antitrust actions are essential to enable the entry of new platforms. It is crucial to ensure that platforms and the entire internet ecosystem continue to innovate, expanding forms of interoperability between them, with the citizen at the center, guaranteeing sovereignty for the use of data. The challenge is that the conditions of regulation ensure that the systems can be agile and flexible to follow the dynamics of the sector and that it does not create a disincentive to investment in innovation. Public Interest Platforms must be promoted, with the principle of data sovereignty, non-discriminatory bias, and the minimization of surveillance systems.
- *Interoperability* - Data interoperability is an essential point in ensuring a sovereign society. Doctorow (2021), in an editorial in the magazine “Communication of the ACM,” pointed to this need. The success story of the internet itself is due to its capacity for interoperability (of machines and computerized systems). Users’ interoperability of data on different platforms should be a starting point to guarantee rights of use, repair, and repair (GRAHAM & THRIFT, 2007; JACKSON, 2014; VELKOVA, 2018). Data portability between systems and platforms needs to be considered within a legal framework to protect personal data.
- *Biases* - Monitoring and stopping processes that increase surveillance and ethnic, social, and gender discrimination. The platforms operate through the massive collection of personal data and algorithmic systems that indicate recommended actions and propose solutions in specific social processes (employment, security,

consumption...). Thinking about ways to inhibit the discriminatory dissemination of recommendation algorithms seems interesting. As we indicated at the beginning of this text, when a system recommends information based on a user's profile, it makes other options invisible, making the recommendation coercive, since there are not many other visible options to choose from. There is little choice. It is essential to create technical and legal mechanisms to block the expansion of these recommendation systems that expand forms of surveillance and manipulation of emotions, creating bias and discrimination. Data is never neutral (AMOORE, 2020; CRAWFORD, 2021; KITCHIN, 2014).

- *The important thing is not to seek neutral algorithms* but to institute libertarian and democratic biases on platforms, especially those of public interest, and to ban systems that are not based on these premises. It is imperative to stop biometrics abuses with clear and applicable laws. This is already happening in some countries around the world. In Brazil, there are examples of indiscriminate use of these biometric technologies. Not everything that can be done should be done. It is necessary to stop technological “laissez-faire.” It would be important that, for each public interest system implemented, a “*prior study of discriminatory impacts*” is produced, explaining which laws regulate what is done with the data and the limits of the systems. Biometrics and dataveillance services cannot be implemented without a legal framework or scientific evidence of their effectiveness.
- *Infopower* - There is an urgent need to discuss the “agency” of data formatting: the acquisition of information through forms, surveys, registrations, and classifications. Data can generate affirmative actions but also discriminatory actions. Formatting constitutes us as citizens and performs us pragmatically. The entire data capture and formatting system agencies and produces the collective. Discussing and thinking about this formatting beyond an essentialist and simplistic view is fundamental. It is necessary to question the action of this infopower politically (as we have seen) and how information is formatted, which is not taken seriously in political discussion, hostage to an idea of Habermasian and anthropocentric public communication.
- *Auditing* - Algorithmic auditing for systems of public government relevance. A broader audit of the design of these systems (development conditions, political decisions, frameworks used in implementation, interface, etc. Look at regulation and auditing based on their insertion in a broader network. A flexible but compulsory system of consultants ad hoc for opinions on public or public-private systems with public impact. We have systems implemented in municipalities, states, and the federal government that do not undergo public audits (without precise analyses of privacy threats, for example). Fundamentally, every system of public relevance that is compulsory for citizens to use must pass through an ad hoc audit and approval institution or committee.

- *Diversity* - Expansion of differences and plurality in representation in the constitution of the algocracy. Considering that algocracy will increase with AI and datafication, it is essential to diversify the group of professionals who produce dataset codes and deal with information analytics. This framework must be plural to encourage diversity in world views, seeking to minimize biases based on race, gender, or social class. The discussion needs to be expanded on the ethical-political understanding of technicians (who produce the algorithms) who always say they do not know about the humanities and that sociologists should study this. The same should be encouraged among humanities professionals so that they become familiar with technical systems. It is essential to expand differences and plurality in representation in the constitution of this algocracy. Kate Crawford (2021) criticizes systems that seek to create AI ethics because they do not operate with diversity.
- *Legislation* - Defense of the Civil Framework and Attention to the LGPD. It is necessary to reinforce and defend the two laws fundamental to data sovereignty in the country. The Marco Civil, the result of a broad public debate and time for reflection; and the LGPD, which arrived late - Brazil was one of the last to implement a General Personal Data Protection Law in Latin America -but which is a guarantee of protection of personal data in the context of massive platformization and datafication.
- *Labor* - Discussion about labor rights in the Gig Economy! Some countries already recognize an employment relationship between the platforms and “collaborators.” In a country with many unemployed people and low educational qualifications, the need for protection is even more significant, as these precarious workers would be more vulnerable to accepting degrading working conditions on platforms. This tends to worsen in the coming years, and the issue must be addressed, especially with the current avalanche of generative artificial intelligence, such as ChatGPT.
- *Science and Technology* - Over the next ten years, the country must reinvest in training human resources computational resources for the area of digital humanities, Artificial Intelligence, and data analysis. AI and IT policies are essential for us to play a less subservient role in AL. Sovereignty, as we have seen, is a dimension of datafication. We lose control whenever we use systems outside the country or send our data to feed foreign private systems. We need sociologists who understand how data works. We need engineers who understand how society works on ethical, moral, and political issues. Investing in training, education, science, and technology is urgent, with serious Artificial Intelligence and IT policies.
- *Environmental sustainability* - Digital technologies and digital platforms are considered virtual, on the cloud, insisting on a mistake of dematerialization. Every system based on digital information and communication technologies generates a carbon footprint due to the consumption of fossil fuels in data centers. It consumes

minerals from the Earth to manufacture various equipment (cables, servers, computers, cell phones...) (BONNEUIL, 2015; PARIKKA, 2015). This means it never dies but becomes electronic waste and continues its journey, increasing the planet's entropy. Data is, therefore, the new oil as a metaphor and materially because we consume oil and coal to generate it. Thinking about environmental sustainability is fundamental to the future of platform society. Policies must require energy and material transparency from platforms and proactive action to reduce the footprints created by this digital materiality.

Conclusion

It becomes clear that issues surrounding data and digital technologies have profound implications for diverse fields of study and social concerns. We cannot separate the study of technology from social and political contexts, nor can we ignore the materiality of digital systems. There is an urgent need to invest in education, science, and technology, specially in digital humanities, artificial intelligence, and data analysis. It is important to prioritize the sustainability of digital technologies and recognize the material impact of these systems on our planet. Only by addressing the complexity and materiality of digital technologies can we create a more equitable and sustainable future for all.

The proposals reveal some non-exhaustive lines of research that should be stimulated in the coming years, such as discussion on forms of platform regulation and disinformation; hate speech; labor relations and platform cooperativism; coherent policies proposals for the development of artificial intelligence; research on digital platforms' materialities (interfaces, software, hardware, infrastructure...) and their forms of agency (political, social, cultural, economic, environmental, informational); research based on data formatting, taking into account issues of gender, race; data surveillance and threats to privacy; studies on compatibility between systems to guarantee interconnection between platforms; right to repair and repair; reflections on colonialism and data sovereignty, among others.

The platformization of society is a reality, and it is imperative that we act now to think of more consistent ways to promote the common good in the country. We cannot allow ourselves to be influenced by incompetence, lack of appetite, or subservience in the face of the challenges of digital culture. Actions must, therefore, be taken now to ensure an inclusive, diverse, emancipatory, and libertarian information society, as envisioned by the internet pioneers.

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Data availability

The author confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Conflict of interest

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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