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Mark Graham

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Regulate, replicate, and resist – the conjunctural geographies of platform urbanism

Mark Graham

Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

Platforms in the urban environment are fundamentally unaccountable. They present themselves as too big to control, too new to regulate, and too innovative to stifle, and remain un-democratic, and usually distant, organizations with no interest in promoting local voices or investing in local priorities. This paper argues that platforms control urban interactions whilst remaining unaccountable through a strategic deployment of 'conjunctural geographies' – a way of being simultaneously embedded and disembedded from the space-times they mediate. These conjunctural geographies, however, render platforms vulnerable. The ephemeral nature of platforms means we can avoid them, circumvent them and replicate them; their material nature suggests points of regulation and resistance. The paper closes by pointing to three broad strategies —*regulate, replicate,* and *resist* - which can be deployed to build alternate platform futures. Each of which is built on understanding the simultaneously embedded and disembedded ways in which platforms occupy their conjunctural geographies.

We live in cities where we navigate landscapes of not just bricks and mortar, but also data and algorithms. These digital augmentations of the city are both part of, and produced by, the digital platforms that play a key role in controlling space. Platform companies exist at spatial bottlenecks – they mediate spatial interactions, and thereby exert immense power over local economic geographies. By controlling interactions between users, workers, capital, and information, privately-owned platforms like Uber, Google, and Amazon have embedded themselves into urban life as part of the so-called "platform economy" Srnicek (2017).

They have achieved much of this control by sitting between two visions of digital space. For decades, the internet has been conceived of as beyond geography – the internet was somewhere; out "there"; but not certainly not "here" (Graham, 2015; 2015). Despite their deep integration into the urban fabric, platforms have thereby often presented themselves as aloof from local politics and immune to local regulation. But a generation of geographers has offered a different understanding of the Internet, by describing hybrid spaces that are co-created, transduced, and augmented by the digital (Dodge & Kitchin, 2005; Graham, De Sabbata, & Zook, 2015; Massey, 2005). Space, in other words, is co-constituted by the digital code and content that brings it into being.

Platforms have enormous power to shape the lived geographies of billions of people worldwide. Yet despite this power, platforms have very little accountability. They remain un-democratic, and usually distant, organizations with no interest in promoting local voices or investing in local priorities. I argue here that platforms achieve this power through a strategic deployment of "conjunctural geographies" – a way of being simultaneously embedded and disembedded from the space-times they mediate. These geographies ultimately allow platforms to concentrate and exert power. They can link themselves to the local to concentrating reward, and retreat to their ephemeral digital dualisms when abdicating responsibility. These conjunctural geographies, however, can also form the basis of three broad strategies to hold platforms to account.

Conjunctural geographies

Digital platforms that mediate work (e.g. Uber, Upwork, Deliveroo) treat labor power as a commodity that can be bought. In doing so, they disembed it from interpersonal trust networks, state policies, and legal frameworks. As Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, and Hjorth (2019, p. 935) note, "treating labour as a factor of production rather than as a human quality can lead to working conditions that are harmful to the very people who embody that labour". We know that many platform workers suffer from precarious working conditions.

These poor conditions ultimately exist because of the aforementioned disembedding and commoditization, made possible by platforms commanding a very different use of space than that of the platforms' users. In South Africa, Uber famously was able to avoid a legal challenge by workers; not because the workers had no valid claim, but rather because they made it against the wrong company (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). Uber drivers around the world have a contract with Uber International Holding(s) BV (a Netherlands-based company), not with local branches. Leaving aside whether or not this is defensible practice, drivers in South Africa are hardly going to take up their case in a Dutch court. By operating at a different spatial scale to their workers, platforms can avoid local accountability.

Search and advertising platforms such as Google are likewise deeply embedded into the places that they represent (Ford & Graham 2016; Thornton, 2017). They continually reform the city by generating spatial representations, which influence perceptions, which in turn impact countless flows and interactions of people and places (Graham, 2018). They take little responsibility for the worlds they help to create. Google doesn't convene focus groups in Jerusalem, Kashmir, Crimea, or Northern Ireland to discuss how it represents local places. It doesn't seek to build consensus or find ways of representing competing visions, and reveals little about who, what, and where it chooses to make visible or invisible. Instead, it presents itself as a technology company with no boots on the ground and no desire or even ability to concern itself with such nuances. Yet, Google is doing much more than simply representing the world: in co-creating augmented geographies, it has become part of the fabric of the places it represents.

The concerns expressed by scholars, workers, trade unions, and policy makers about contemporary platforms generally boil down to tensions arising from the fact that they seek control and reward while abdicating responsibility to those who perform the labor

that powers them. Integral to the platform model is the idea that they are simply a "mediator". By presenting itself as a technology company rather than a transportation company, Uber can shrug when pressed about the low earnings of their drivers. When people complain about how Google Maps represents a contested place, the company can claim to be simply presenting the outcome of efficient algorithms. Political questions are thereby recast as technical or organizational ones. We therefore end up with unaccountable and undemocratic organizations managing key digital infra-structures of our cities.

Alternate platform futures

If we are to exercise a digital right to our own cities, we need to think about how to subvert the conjunctural geographies of platforms. Their ephemeral nature means we can avoid them, circumvent them and replicate them; their material nature suggests points of regulation and resistance. Three strategies – *regulate, replicate*, and *resist* – can be deployed to build alternate platform futures.

First, the inherent embeddedness of platforms is an important factor when consider-ing how to subject them to local regulations. There is no person, organization, or computer that doesn't fall under at least one set of laws. Yet, Google, Uber, and myriad other platforms often turn a blind eye to them: relying on their perceived disembedded-ness to claim local rules do not apply. However, this is a losing battle for platforms the world over. For almost every platform, what began as a simple business model that could be deployed anywhere, is now an increasingly complicated operation that has come under public scrutiny and ever-stricter legal rulings (Prassl, 2018).

Second, the disembeddedness of platforms should be highlighted when considering ways to circumvent or replicate them. Tom Goodwin (2015) famously noted that "Uber, the world's largest taxi company, owns no vehicles and Facebook, the world's most popular media owner, creates no content." Indeed, this is what makes a platform a platform. But this ephemerality, the ability of a platform to appear and disappear at the tap of a button, is also a core weakness. By relying on their ability to mediate flows of information, platforms leave themselves vulnerable to local alternatives. Regulations that see platforms as civic utilities – for example, mandating a city-owned ride hailing plat-form – or consumer pressure to support a local platform cooperative could quickly enroll workers onto platforms driven by local priorities.

Third, it is worth considering the embeddedness of platforms to think about how they might be more actively resisted. The atomization of platform workers is usually held up as an example of the structural weakness of workers as compared with platforms. Workers compete against one another, while lacking the associational power required to challenge platforms (Silver, 2003). But as platforms drive down wages and working conditions, they have been sowing the seeds of conflict with their own workers, who are starting to use the embeddedness of platforms against them (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). Platforms may not have any physical presence in the cities in which they operate, but their workers are nonetheless finding ways of using bottlenecks in space-time – for example, through algorithmic hacks as well as the old-fashioned collective power of pickets and strikes – to remind themselves that they too should have a say in how their jobs and their cities are run.

The conjunctural geographies of platform urbanism

It may seem as if digital platforms represent an inevitable urban future of capitalism stripped down to its essentials. Platforms in the urban environment are fundamentally reshaping urban geographies while being apparently too big to control, too new to regulate, and too innovative to stifle. They command their conjunctural geographies to centralize urban exchanges in ways that allow them to capture significant rents, whilst avoiding the messy business of adhering to local laws, owning local assets, or employing local workers. They embed themselves in key sites of informational exchange, whilst remaining sufficiently materially and organizationally disembedded to avoid significant accountability.

However, this intervention has argued that those same conjunctures are also structural weaknesses for platforms. Their use of geography is slowly being tamed by regulators, by consumers, and by workers. Learning from these struggles requires a renewed effort to understand the embeddedness and disembeddedness of platforms that span the globe while being woven into the contemporary urban fabric. This is not a rehash of the old "geography matters" argument. Geography clearly does matter, but not simply as a way to describe the tethering of platforms to places. It is rather in the *conjuncture* of tethered and untethered relationships with space that we need to envision how platforms bring new digital geographies into being – and envision how we can tame them.

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ORCID

Mark Graham http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8370-9848

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