3.4   The Action-Structuring Potentialities of Digital Platforms

It is beyond dispute that platforms exert a profound influence on social processes and the representation of cultures in digital spaces. However, the heterogeneous nature of platforms precludes the formulation of generalizable statements about their social, economic, and cultural impact. Even platforms that can be categorized as belonging to a certain type, such as media, retail, or service platforms, often exhibit considerable variation at a more detailed level. The differences can be found in the interfaces and options for use, in the communication practices between users, and in the media genres that are typical for the individual platforms. The greatest reach is achieved by the large social media platforms YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. These platforms have a low-threshold access, and a wide variety of actors come together in these digital spaces (Dolata and Schrape 2023, 9).

In the context of digital platforms, human actors are inherently engaged with the underlying structures that shape the platforms' actions. These include predefined user interfaces and incrementally adaptable default settings, as well as various communication features (such as commenting, messaging, and similar functions). They also comprise rules about the media genres that can be created. Furthermore, the platforms impose limitations on content length, such as the maximum number of characters permitted in a text on X (280) or the duration of videos which, at least in the early days of TikTok, was restricted to 15 seconds. Users engaged in cultural work on digital platforms must learn to navigate the specific principles of these platforms if they wish to increase their visibility and success. This entails understanding how to design short texts and videos in order to reach as many people as possible or how to communicate specific kinds of content effectively. It is also important to develop an understanding of the potential functional logic of the platform algorithms based on experience and to leverage this understanding to one's advantage – with the aim of increasing visibility. Due to the specific logic of platforms, the challenges faced by content creators such as YouTubers and TikTokers are unique to each platform (Burgess 2021, 23; Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg 2019b, 2).

It is a truism of research in the sociology of technology that technologies and technical artifacts always materialize certain social norms and rules as well as the specific worldviews of the people responsible for the development of such technologies and artifacts. These norms and rules can shape or prefigure the activities of users to a certain extent (Akrich 1992; Dolata 2013, 32–34).

It is evident that platforms can also exert a structuring influence on the actions of cultural workers. A number of media genres that have emerged in the context of platforms should be considered here, for example Instagram stories. Since this is essentially an audiovisual media genre, Instagram stories cannot be described as a new phenomenon per se. Rather, it is the specific possibilities for embellishing Instagram stories that are to a certain extent pre-figured by the specifications of the Instagram platform and that ensure recognition value or encourage users to follow certain design conventions when producing stories. These pre-configured elements include, for example, the rule that videos can only be recorded in portrait format. Furthermore, Instagram stories are distinguished by their time constraints, with content creators utilizing them to engage with followers in a distinctive, often more intimate manner than is possible with standard image or video posts.

Nevertheless, it is irrefutable that such structures and rules inscribed in technologies are never determinative of action; they can always be interpreted to some extent (Dolata 2019, 198). To illustrate: let us consider, again, the example of Instagram stories. Within a clearly defined framework, the specific design of these stories is always the responsibility of the human actors on the platform. This is an essential prerequisite for the emergence, establishment, and further development of new media genres. This would be implausible if users were not afforded the opportunity for creative interpretation of the given media genres. In this respect, platforms are also dependent on users, who develop new practices in the context of the platform and establish communicative norms that cannot be fully foreseen by the platform operators. Therefore, a recursive relationship between platforms and their users must always be assumed. On the one hand, platforms influence the behavior of users; on the other hand, users also influence the development of platforms (Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg 2019b, 2; van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 11).

3.5   Analyzing Socio-Technical Relations in the Platform Context

The preceding sections have made it evident that the specific relationships between platforms and human actors are a central topic of platform-related research. In essence, these are *socio-technical* interactions based on the interplay between platform mechanisms and user practices. Practices of human actors that are linked to specific software and hardware configurations can become highly normalized or habitualized over time. One illustrative example is the