

More than Meso

An Integrative Framework for Analyzing the Platformization of the News Ecosystem. *By Pascal Schneiders*

The rapid rise of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok has fundamentally transformed the production, distribution, and consumption of news. Over the past decade, research has demonstrated how platforms shape attention flows, reorganize media organizations, influence journalistic practices (cf. Nielsen&Ganter 2022), and increasingly structure public communication (cf. Fischer&Jarren 2024; van Dijck et al. 2018). While this body of work has generated important insights into specific dimensions of platformization, it remains fragmented across different levels of analysis. Existing studies often focus either on individual users and journalists, on organizational behavior of news media and platforms, or on broader societal consequences. As a result, there is a lack of integrative frameworks capable of explaining how platformization unfolds simultaneously across different analytical levels and how developments on one level affect dynamics on others.

This article addresses this gap by developing an integrative theoretical framework for analyzing the news ecosystem's platformization. The framework seeks to explain how platform logics diffuse throughout the ecosystem, how interactions between actors, organizations, and societal structures shape this process, how different stages of platformization can be conceptualized and assessed, and which ethical and policy measures can be derived.

The framework draws primarily on neo-institutionalist theory and, more specifically, on the concept of institutional logics. Neo-institutionalist theory explains why differentiated norms, values, and practices become established in certain areas. The fundamental assumption is that the transformation of ecosystems is significantly shaped by organizations and institutions on the meso level. A transformation of ecosystems occurs when organizations introduce new logics (that is, shared systems of values, norms, rules and practices), which then spread

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at the meso level and spill over to the micro and macro levels – in other words, when they permeate the ecosystem both horizontally and vertically. At the same time, individual actors and structures can influence institutional logics at the meso level. Power plays a key role in the enforcement of logics; it is a transformative variable facilitating or hindering certain outcomes. This stems primarily from the fact that, unlike those subject to power, those in power have alternative courses of action – for example, because they control scarce relevant (im)material resources. Those in power are consequently able to make autonomous decisions and to restrict the alternative courses of action or the autonomy of others. If actors succeed in imposing their logic, this is accompanied by a homogenization of the ecosystem in terms of values, norms, and practices. Specifically, platforms possess significant economic, technological, infrastructural, and informational resources that enable them to shape the behavior of other actors within the ecosystem.

The conceptual approach proceeds in two steps. First, the article contrasts the institutional logics of news media and social media platforms. While the news media logic is shaped by journalistic norms, public responsibility, editorial autonomy, and the production of socially relevant information, the platform logic is characterized by privatization, algorithmic curation, datafication, and the monetization of user attention (cf. Altmeppen et al. 2022; Seignani&Theine 2024). Second, the framework develops a model that distinguishes between stability, gradual change, and transformative change, depending on the degree to which platform logics have permeated the news ecosystem at these three levels.

The framework then identifies different stages of platformization on each analytical level. On the micro level, platformization influences how individuals access information, evaluate news quality, and understand journalism and public communication. A transformative stage is reached when individuals primarily rely on platforms for information and opinion formation and – having internalized the platform logic – increasingly define news according to platform metrics such as visibility, popularity, and engagement.

On the meso level, platformization becomes visible through the growing dependence of news organizations on platform infrastructures, data, tools, metrics, and audiences. The framework highlights different organizational responses, ranging from adaptation and hybridization to resistance. Transformative change occurs when news organizations lose their autonomy

and become mere content suppliers within platform-controlled environments, or when platforms and platform complements replace traditional news organizations as central providers of public information.

On the macro level, platformization affects the constitution and functioning of public spheres. As platforms increasingly organize access to information, determine visibility, and structure public discourse through algorithmic systems, public communication becomes progressively privatized. The framework suggests that transformative change at this level would involve a transition from deliberative public spheres toward fragmented and platform-dependent publics shaped primarily by commercial incentives rather than democratic values.

The article's central finding is that current developments are best characterized not as a completed transformation but as a process of gradual change and hybridization. Across all three levels, platform logics have gained substantial influence, yet they have not fully displaced the traditional logic of news media. Instead, ongoing processes of adaptation, negotiation, translation, and resistance have produced hybrid configurations in which platform and news media logics coexist and interact. Platformization therefore appears as an open-ended and contested process rather than a deterministic trajectory.

The analysis further highlights a series of ethical and policy implications. Given the paramount importance of the meso level for the news ecosystem, appropriate measures should focus primarily (but not exclusively) on this level. More specifically, media policy should reduce news organizations' structural dependencies on platform infrastructures and strengthen the production and distribution of high-quality journalism, for example through arm's-length journalism subsidies or a public interest journalism platform. Platforms should be encouraged or required to align recommendation and moderation systems more closely with public-interest objectives. On the micro level, strengthening news literacy is essential to enable citizens to critically assess information across increasingly complex and platformized information environments. Taken together, these measures aim to preserve the autonomy of citizens, news media, journalism, and public spheres.

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Full Article

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