

these policies in order to be active on platforms. Consequently, terms and conditions are of paramount importance, as they regulate both access to platforms and users' options for action, as well as the use of their data. On platforms, users therefore always encounter "*platform-specific rules of action*" (Dolata and Schrape 2023, 12; *italics in original*), which, according to Dolata and Schrape, can be characterized by four key features. Firstly, it should be noted that these rules are not open to negotiation; they are defined by the platform companies, creating a top-down relationship on platforms in this respect. Secondly, the rules defined by the platform companies translate into the interfaces and algorithmic structures of the platforms and form a technical set of rules that cannot be simply overridden and always fulfil the function of structuring action. Thirdly, the rules can be continuously changed and adapted by the platforms. Furthermore, the platforms monitor all user activities within the framework of their own rules (Dolata and Schrape 2023, 12–13).

3.3 Digital Platforms and Relations of Cultural Power

The preceding analysis has shown that platforms take on the role of accentuating actors in modern media cultures in a variety of ways. They can, in principle, influence economic processes as well as processes of social exchange and cultural production in digital spaces. On the one hand, platforms create new opportunities for interaction between, for example, creative artists, advertisers, and private individuals. On the other hand, these interactions are regulated by algorithms, interfaces, moderation guidelines, and terms and conditions. As a variety of processes, including private communication, the distribution of aesthetic objects, and product advertising, increasingly take place in a platform context, individuals, creative artists, and companies are compelled to establish an online presence on platforms and to adapt to the rules of the game to some extent. In many professional fields, self-presentation on various platforms has become a basic prerequisite for economic success.

For these reasons, platform companies are initially perceived as highly influential economic actors. However, their influence extends beyond the economic realm (Dolata 2019, 183; Gillespie 2018, 254). As van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal argue: "Platforms do not reflect the social: they *produce* the social structure we live in" (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 2; *italics in original*). Even relatively early relevant researchers have argued that platforms cannot be understood in a purely technical sense, nor exclusively as digital spaces of social

interaction and cultural production (Helmond 2015, 2). Rather, the specific intertwining of software-based, programmable, and algorithmically controlled infrastructures, economic commerce, and social action spaces is characteristic of the relatively new phenomenon of platforms. Dolata and Schrape state: “Internet-based platform companies represent a new form of enterprise featuring unique characteristics of *social embeddedness*” (Dolata and Schrape 2023, 2; *italics in original*).

Although it is now widely acknowledged that platforms cannot be viewed as neutral actors, the myth of impartial platforms has persisted for some time (Gillespie 2018, 256–57). Initially, platform companies portrayed themselves as non-interventionist, arguing that they provided access to their services to anyone with the necessary technical resources. Moreover, access to the platforms did not appear to involve any financial outlay, as no registration fees were generally charged. However, as previously described, the data trails left by users are monetized, so of course the platforms earn money with every registered and active person (Gillespie 2018, 256–57).

The concept of platform neutrality has its origins in internet-related discourses of the late 1990s and early 2000s. At the time, one of the central expectations of the so-called Web 2.0 was that it would break down the rigid roles between producers and recipients of media offerings. For example, it was predicted that journalistic mass media would lose importance as compared to user-generated content, leading to a democratization of digital spaces. In this context, considerable optimism was placed on the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, which promised to focus on collective intelligence and an emancipation from traditional gatekeepers of knowledge production and communication. In essence, Web 2.0 promised, to a certain extent, the dissolution of inequalities between large gatekeepers and media users, as well as a strengthening of democratic decision-making processes inside and outside of digital spaces (Schrape 2021, 70–72).

It is evident that the relevance of one-to-many media is declining. In principle, the number of voices that can be heard in digital spaces is greater than it was before the advent of the internet and digital platforms. However, due to the functional logic of platforms described above, it can be argued that platforms “do not merely mediate public discourse, they constitute it” (Gillespie 2018, 257). It can be argued that the platforms themselves, or rather the commercial companies responsible for them, determine which forms of interaction and participation are possible on them and which content is displayed to which users on the basis of opaque algorithmic processes. The specific forms

of sociality that manifest on platforms are thus fundamentally dependent on the respective technical functional logics.

Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that the curation mechanisms of digital platforms are largely based on specific hierarchies of content. This often results in certain types of content becoming more visible than others, thereby reproducing cultural hegemonies within this context. Relevant studies have demonstrated that the results generated by search engines are sometimes based on racialized stereotypes, which are often also linked to other categories of social difference, primarily gender. For instance, it is noteworthy that certain professions that are widely regarded as prestigious, such as doctors, are predominantly associated with *white* and male individuals in the results of Google image searches. In contrast, search results for Black and female people yield highly sexualized images (Noble 2018). With regard to sexist stereotypes, for example, Sophie Bishop's study of beauty vloggers demonstrates that, in certain segments, the YouTube platform prioritizes content that is characterized by stereotypically feminine representations. Furthermore, certain keywords, such as *beauty* and *makeup*, are primarily associated with female content creators. This implies that the perpetuation of sexist stereotypes on YouTube is, at least in part, automated, and cultural biases are embedded in the platform's algorithmic architecture (Bishop 2018).

In the context of ongoing discussions surrounding the perceived impartiality of digital platforms, it is also important to acknowledge that the vast majority of prominent digital platforms, which are frequently the subject of such debates, are operated by companies headquartered in specific geographical regions. The majority of these companies are domiciled in either the United States or China, some of the sectoral platforms also in Western Europe and Russia (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 26; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022, 15). Platform-specific developments in the rest of the world are barely visible in the international English-language research literature, with the exception of a few instructive works on platformization in East Asian contexts beyond China (e.g., Kim and Yu 2019; Cho 2021; Park, Jo, and Kim 2023). Given that international English-language research predominantly examines platforms operated by U.S. companies, it is important to exercise caution when generalizing research findings (Nieborg, Duffy, and Poell 2020b, 5). It is reasonable to assume that certain platforms will prioritize content that is most likely to succeed in specific geographic regions with the most promising markets.