7.1. Information platforms

'On ne pense que par image.'

Albert Camus

Synopsis: *Information platforms in the analogue and digital worlds (1–5); The state as a digital platform? (6); In what way, then, are states information platforms for their citizens? (7).*

1.

What are 'information platforms'? The term is used here to define the state; however, it is itself in need of some further explanation because, unlike the state, it has been coined only recently.[304]

2. Platforms in the analogue world*

Platforms are well-known in the analogue world. The term literally denotes a 'flat raised area or structure' or 'a raised level surface on which people or things can stand'.

In practice, today platforms can best be viewed at sea: they are raised structures constructed like artificial islands, floating and visible from afar, anchored and not moving—and therefore independent and self-sufficient, but also in need of interconnection with the rest of the world. Platforms, however, can also be found on shore, for example, in the context of politics: they denote both the raised structure for a politician and his entourage to stand on so as to make a speech, as well as, metaphorically, a politician's principles and ideas. All those who share these principles and ideas are considered to belong, politically, to the same platform, to view the world through the same political lens.

Platforms, therefore, also have a metaphorical meaning in the analogue world. Both these meanings are helpful for visualising the state as an information platform.

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304   This, however, does not affect the timelessness of the definition of the state (see also Chap. 11), but rather has (only now) made it visible.

3. Platforms in the digital world*

It is with regard to the digital world, however, that the term is mostly discussed today. For the past few years online digital platforms have caught the public eye, be these private (i.e. belonging to individuals) or public (i.e. belonging to governments).

Online platforms today are digital-born informational infrastructures that offer certain functionalities. Initially their offering was social, meaning that they offered interaction opportunities among individuals in the digital world ('online social networks') in the form of a digital agora or forum. It was not long before financial opportunities were added to their functionality (transforming the agora into a market).

Today, online platforms are enclosed communities, 'gated gardens' or informational islands in the ocean of the digital world (admittedly, with each one serving only a single or a few purposes), where individuals may participate, usually for free, within an entirely new, and until recently unheard-of, business model, wherein value (and strength) lies in user numbers and not (directly, at least) in transactions (with profit made indirectly, by selling the details of these individuals' use of the platform to advertisers).

4.

Online platforms eventually attracted the regulators' attention, admittedly long after their invention and development by large, multinational private actors. For the moment the regulator views them not as competitors to the state but rather as a new field of human activity (one that has already been undertaken and thus freely chosen by the creators of the platforms).

Usefully, however, the newly formed regulations have provided us with the first formal definition of what we can consider to be information platforms: 'service providers that store and disseminate information at the request of their users'.[305] This bland definition, obviously skewed towards the private sector, will have to do for now.

5.

Regardless of the unavoidable specificity of regulation (and therefore its preordained expiry date), it is likely that the way in which information

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305   Article 3, point (i) of the Digital Services Act.

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platforms have developed so far is explainable within the context of the advent of a new reality for humans, that of the digital world.

Parallels could be drawn between the digital world, which is only a few decades old, and the prehistoric, imagined, period when humans first had to form (larger) communities—hence the focus of online platforms on user numbers. Similarly, belonging to an online platform is the only way for most humans to understand and make some use of the vast new and unexplored world in front of them, that is, the digital world.

Once formed, these digital communities zealously guarded their members—and tried to sustain themselves in any way possible.[306] Unlike in the analogue world, however, newcomers did not have to fight to remove older inhabitants, or compete for access to limited resources in a first-to-arrive, life-or-death competition. On the contrary, because information in the digital world is infinite,[307] any new platform is set up alongside existing ones, only competing with them for users.[308] And users are happy to oblige by joining the new platform, because they are able to belong simultaneously to more than one—which also explains why individualisation and unique identification remain an issue today for humans in the digital world.

Crucially, however, information platforms in the digital world are, today, private. In other words, it is not humans and their states that are trying to process information in a (pre-existing) reality (i.e. Nature), but part of them (the private sector) that is opening up new fields of human activity. It is for this reason that the stage of development of the digital world that we are currently in should not, therefore, be paralleled with the original, common to all, prehistoric period when humans and their groups started from zero. Rather it corresponds with a point in time when some engaged with the world better prepared than others, meaning not everyone was on the same level. This is why parallels should instead be drawn with colonialism[309] and company-states in order to visualise, and to better understand, the reality of today's online information platforms.

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306 One must not forget that the for-profit online platforms of today succeeded the large 'forums' of the first days of the Internet, which perished as soon as the money dried up.

307 See Chap. 1, par. 16.

308 On the transformation of individuals (and citizens) into users, see Chap. 17, par. 11.

309 See also Chap. 17, par. 14.

6. The state as a digital platform?

The digital world may have made the definition, and true nature, of the state finally visible, but has it also affected it in any significant way?

Although private online platforms strive to mimic state functions within their (digital) territories (through the unique identification of their users and creation of their digital ecosystem), they have affected the relationship between the state and its citizens only superficially. Private online platforms may individualise and identify their users; however, they do this on the basis of credentials issued by these users' states and, in any case, not uniquely—in the sense that a user can have many profiles on the same platform.

In addition, although individuals may well live large parts of their lives today on online platforms (for work, study or entertainment), humans are still anchored in the analogue world not only biologically (i.e. digital money earned on a digital platform is still needed to buy groceries in the analogue world), but also socially (i.e. humans still interact physically with each other on a daily basis).

Therefore, for the moment, at least, neither the state's definition nor the state's nature[310] has been gravely affected by the digital world. In essence, the digital world affects the government[311] more than the state: because the state is natural to humans and it is humans that had the will to create, and live in, the digital world, their relationship with their states remains intact.

7. In what way, then, are states information platforms for their citizens? *

All of the above points provide useful and relevant visualisations of a state as an information platform. Platforms are distinguishable both in their literal and in their metaphorical sense. One can see them (when physical) or understand their existence (when metaphorical) from outside or from within. They thus have a territory (in which they are sovereign) and borders. These circumscribe the information platform that is the state.

On a platform, people, or things, can stand; in states as information platforms people can carry out their lives, processing information pertaining to other people and things. On political or other metaphorical platforms people share beliefs in ideas; states as information platforms function under

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310   See Chap. 11.
311   See Chap. 12, par. 10.

common rules (regulations). Platforms' inherent flatness is also relevant; all can stand on them and all, at a specific point at least, are equal, having an equal footing on them,[312] regardless of the fact that this equality only lasts for a moment.

The information platforms that are states can be visualised as informational islands in a vast sea (our planet). Some of these islands may decide to come closer together and form larger constellations, to form archipelagos. The EU is the first such archipelago, the precursor of things to come, as will be seen.[313]

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312   See Chap. 22, par. 7, on equality as a platform right.
313   In Chap. 19.