Platform Studies and Digital Cultural Industries

Paolo Magaudda*   Marco Solaroli†

Abstract

By providing a review of a number of recent and relevant publications, this paper reconstructs major trends, topics and challenges within the state of the art of scholarly research on the platformization of cultural industries, addressing the crucial role that digital platforms have acquired in recent years in the production and circulation of a variety of cultural contents. More specifically, after offering an introduction on the ways in which the study of digital platforms emerged as strictly intertwined with the evolution of certain cultural industry sectors, such as gaming and video sharing, the paper addresses in depth three distinctive domains of cultural production and consumption: music, journalism, and photography. In so doing, the paper traces a variety of perspectives beyond the mainstream political economy-oriented focus of platform studies, suggesting emerging paths for future research on these rapidly shifting and increasingly debated issues.

Keywords: Platform society; cultural production; music; journalism; photography; visual culture; Spotify; Instagram.

* Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padua (Italy); ✉ paolo.magaudda@unipd.it; ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0830-8299

† Department of the Arts, University of Bologna (Italy); ✉ marco.solaroli@unibo.it; ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5433-1540

1   Introduction: Cultural Industries and the Emergence of Platform Studies

In recent years, online platforms have quickly turned into a focal topic of discussion in several fields of the social, political and human sciences, where these technical artefacts have been recognized as crucial actors in reshaping and reconfiguring a wide array of activities and relationships. Within cultural industries, platforms have acquired a significant role and have increasingly affected the processes through which producers, intermediaries and industries create contents and organize their circulation. This essay aims to address the relationships between digital platforms and cultural industries by providing a review of a number of recent and relevant publications specifically related to three sectors: music, news, and photography, and in doing so, outlines major trends, issues and challenges within the state of the art of scholarly research.

The paper begins by outlining the fact that the analysis of cultural industries and cultural production has been instrumental, at the end of the 2000s, in both identifying platforms as an autonomous topic of research and in introducing novel perspectives, including the analysis of platforms' technological features. Then, after a closer look at the emergence of platforms studies as strictly pertaining to the reconfiguration of cultural industry sectors and to the notion of "platformization", the paper addresses more specifically three distinctive cultural sectors. *Music* represents one of the cultural sectors in which platforms had their earliest beginnings, and in a more integrated way, in playing a role in reshaping the industry's assets as well as listeners' practices. This has more recently become evident through examinations of the workings of Spotify, a major platform around which the whole music industry has been deeply reconfigured. In *journalism*, social media and platform companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google are considered increasingly influential in shaping the ways news is selected, organized and presented to readers, with a number of professional and public implications, including those which concern the adaptability of news organizations to the platforms' often changing algorithmic mechanisms and value hierarchies. *Photography* and *visual culture* are possibly the most recently emerging areas of inquiry for platform studies, which are starting to outline the impact of such increasingly popular digital platforms as Instagram on the everyday circulation of networked images, on the aesthetic forms of visual communication, and on some professional field values, e.g. photographic "objectivity" and "authenticity". Reviewing recent scholarly research on these topics enables us to trace a variety of perspectives beyond the mainstream political economy-oriented focus of platform studies, allowing us, in the conclusion of this paper, to suggest some relevant paths for future research on such rapidly emerging and increasingly debated phenomena.

To start with, it is worth noting that in the last couple of years a relevant turn in the debate on platforms in the social sciences has been provoked by the publication of the book *The Platform Society. Public Values in a Connective World* by van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018), in which the authors intersected issues typical of political economy of communication with a Science & Technology Studies framework. This approach fostered an understanding of the interconnection between technical mechanisms characterizing today's Western platform ecosystem and their social and political consequences. In doing so, the authors also popularized the notion of *platform society*, defined as a distinctive society "in which social and economic traffic increasingly channelled by an (overwhelmingly corporate) global online ecosystem is driven by algorithms and fueled by data" (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 4). However, while the overall framework articulated in the book represents a comprehensive view on the role and mechanisms of platforms in several sectors of society (including urban transport, healthcare, and education), its only significant reference to cultural production and media industries regards the news me-

dia sector, leaving out of this discussion the fact that platforms first and foremost affected the ways in which culture is produced, circulated, and consumed.

In order to address the relationship between platforms and cultural production, a step back in time may be useful, as this would allow us to outline how the very beginning of social inquiry on platforms has been strictly intertwined with the reconfiguration of cultural industries and the ways in which cultural content has been produced and distributed online since the emergence of so-called "Web 2.0." Indeed, the very origins of what we can define as the proper field of *platform studies* were rooted in the analysis of the evolution of the gaming sector. The work that more than any other has contributed to popularizing the analysis of platforms as a distinctive approach to gaming, and more broadly, to cultural contents mediated through digital machines, has been the seminal book *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*, by Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost (2009). In this study, the authors charted the development of a distinctive platform in the gaming sector, the Atari 2600, which was developed by the Japanese firm Atari in the late 1970s and remained very popular up to the mid-1980s, focussing distinctively on the relationship between a platform intended as "the hardware and software design of standardized computing systems" and the "creative works that have been produced on those platforms" (Montfort & Bogost, 2009, p. 2). Although mostly limited on the ways in which the technical features of the Atari 2600 platform influenced the form and aesthetics of gaming, nonetheless this book paved the way for other analyses on different informatics platforms (e.g. Jones & Thiruvathukal, 2012; Salter & Murray, 2014; Custodio, 2020), pushing the social and cultural analysis of videogames from a dominant content-based focus towards a novel sensitivity for the technical dimensions of digital systems, already common in software studies focused on coding, programming and protocols.

If software studies contributed to identifying platforms in their proper technical dimensions, through which it is possible to investigate the changing dynamics of content production, a further step in developing the social study of platforms emerged again in relation to another cultural industry sector — more specifically the realm of video sharing. Focusing especially on YouTube, Tarleton Gillespie (2010) triggered a wide debate on platforms by outlining their ideological dimensions within a media industry world undergoing rapid changes. First of all, Gillespie outlined the strong metaphorical power that the term "platform" had acquired in our society, its adoption in everyday language for different purposes, and outlined in this way how the word has been in recent years at the centre of a wider process of re-semantization, exceeding computers and software sectors. More specifically, Gillespie also outlined how technology companies like Google and Microsoft were among the first to use the term "platform" to identify their media services. For instance, in 2006, when Google bought the video sharing platform YouTube, the definition of this service that circulated through the company's press releases marked an important semantic transformation, as for the first time YouTube was no longer described as just a "website" or a "community", but more distinctively as a "distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small" (Gillespie, 2010, p. 348). From that moment on, technology companies, especially those related to cultural industry sectors, appropriated the term "platform" to describe their services as "open", "flat" and "neutral" spaces, on which anyone could act without differences or discrimination. In sum, it was during the reconfiguration of cultural industry sectors, and as consequence of the emergence of more interactive tools available to produce and share cultural contents, that digital media industries adopted the term "platform" as part of a broader rhetorical strategy to publicly present themselves as neutral aggregators that connect content producers and consumers.

In a very short period, it has been widely recognized that cultural industries and cultural

production have been deeply affected in different ways and at different levels by both general platforms (like Google or Amazon) and sectorial platforms which are active in the circulation of distinctive kinds of digital cultural content. While we will focus this paper's following sections on music, news, and photography sectors, it would clearly be possible to address other contexts in which the rise of platforms has quickly reconfigured the way cultural contents are created and distributed — e.g. in cinema, with the rise of Netflix as a disruptive actor in relation to the funding of film production, the logics of their distribution, as well as the practices of their consumption (Lobato, 2019; Siles et al., 2019; Hadida et al., 2020).

In this broad framework, an emerging notion which addresses the whole set of transformations produced by platforms that are affecting cultural industries is that of *platformization*, adopted by Helmond (2015) and then Nieborg and Poell (2018) to define the "penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and platform rules in various sectors of the economy and daily life" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4275). The platformization of cultural production implies a whole reorganization of cultural practices and also of the ways in which it becomes possible to conceive and understand the role of platforms for cultural circulation. In this reconfiguration, digital platforms acquire an increasingly integral position in influencing the popularity of artists, in making their work visible and in establishing the possibility for consumers to access cultural products. Authors focusing on the notion of platformization pay special attention to the exploration of the computational back-end of platforms, for instance by looking at how platforms exercise control over third-party developers through the management of infrastructural features, such as APIs (application programming interfaces) and software development kits (Helmond, 2015). The analysis of the platformization of different sectors connected to cultural industries and cultural production has very recently been catalyzed as an emerging strand of research, which has been collected in two relevant special issues of the journal *Social Media + Society* (Duffy et al., 2019; Nieborg et al., 2020) and which will soon be systematized in a dedicated book on platforms and cultural production (Poell et al., 2021).

These seminal works on the role of platforms in relation to different sectors and issues connected to cultural industries recall two basic and propaedeutic points. First, digital cultural sectors have been at the foreground of the wide set of transformations that led in the last couple of years to the rise of platforms as crucial actors in a wider reconfiguration of the organization of contemporary society. Second, along this process, the initial studies of digital cultural industries' transformation were instrumental for the development of new relevant issues, perspectives and concepts related to cultural industries, but are also potentially fruitful in the wider study of platforms in different social domains.

2   Platforms and Music

Looking at the intersection between platforms and digital cultural industries, music can be definitively considered a paradigmatic sector: on the one hand, historically, the music sector had been affected from an earlier point in time and more deeply by digitalization, at least since the rise of the first generation of music distribution websites which emerged in the early 2000s — first of all through Apple's iTunes, at that time the major seller of MP3 music files worldwide. On the other hand, music had been soon identified by several media scholars as a sector in which the early consequences of platformization could be identified more clearly, for instance through the investigation of today's main music platform, Spotify (e.g. Marshall, 2015; Prey, 2016; Vonderau, 2019). While, in the pre-Spotify age, several scholars outlined that the emergence of integrated infrastructure centred on the MP3 format was crucial in reshaping

the music industry's organization and the cultural construction of music value (Sterne, 2012; Morris, 2015; Magaudda, 2011), the actual music industry ecosystem, cantered on a major platform like Spotify, offers a useful entry point to understand the different layers on which platformization can unfold its consequences on different levels.

The most relevant study so far about Spotify is the work of a team of Swedish scholars, who collected their main findings in the recent book *Spotify Teardown* (Eriksson et al., 2019). First of all, the authors put together a detailed story of this platform, one able to unveil to what extent music is now part of a larger global system in which platforms play a key role, which outlines how this platform's trajectory exemplifies the wider logic of financialization that has characterized the logic of digital platforms over the past decade (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 31). Indeed, the authors documented the evolution of Spotify from being a sort of "underdog" music service, strictly connected with the file-sharing scene and the online piracy environment, to a global corporate firm, based on financialization and on the commodification of music through datafication and the exploitation of users' behaviours.

Spotify was founded in 2006 in Stockholm by two young digital entrepreneurs, already turned millionaires in previous years thanks to the launch of other start-ups related to online advertising. As the authors argue, although the success of Spotify was mainly linked to the idea of offering a legal and profitable digital music distribution model for record labels (unlike previous file sharing networks, like Napster), in the early years of the platform's business, until the launch of an official version in 2008, Spotify exploited the advancement in peer-to-peer technology already adopted by the pirate-related file sharing communities, relying on a vast unauthorized music catalogue previously shared by users of illegal file sharing networks (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 45).

Spotify's financialization process represents an interesting case for us to understand how the creation and distribution of cultural content is nowadays closely intertwined with business models based on global financial flows typical of the platform society. As media scholar Patrick Vonderau (2019, p. 6) points out, "Spotify is not simply a music streaming service, but represents a media company, operating at the intersection of advertising, technology, music and — above all — finance". In other words, the case of Spotify can reveal the tensions and contradictions characterising platforms, involving, on the one hand, their pre-eminently financial nature, and, on the other hand, their tendency to identify their identity with progressive and democratic social values, well represented by Spotify's slogan "music is for everyone".

Another relevant contribution by the aforementioned team of Swedish researchers is that they attempted to unveil some of the opaque internal mechanisms of Spotify, developing innovative methods to "teardown" the platform and to bring to light their technical features. In doing this, such research also makes manifest the methodological challenges raised by inquiring on private-owned platforms and their internal work and technologies, in this case complicated by the fact that the platform, after an initial partnership, refused to offer any collaboration or disclosure on such matters. As a consequence, in order to bring to light Spotify's mechanisms and to collect data on how algorithms and data management work, the researchers had to rely on experimental research methods, including the use of bots and the creation of fake record labels.

While *Spotify Teardown* clearly remains a scholarly masterpiece within platform studies, it is worth noting that the debate and inquiry on the rise of platforms in the music sector has been quite varied. One of the major sub-topics considered by several scholars is certainly the role of data and their active management by platforms, especially exploring the consequences of "datafication" for music circulation. With contemporary music streaming services like Spotify,

every song we listen to or skip is tracked and then used by algorithms to organize music contents, to differently manage their visibility, and especially to build playlists.

A major example of how datafication contributes actively to shape how music is organized and presented to consumers, on the basis of the analysis of their tastes and preferences through algorithms and data, is the Echo Nest system, adopted by Spotify in 2015 in order to tailor its music streaming flows. As addressed, among others, by Robert Prey (2016), in 2015 following the acquisition of the start-up Echo Nest, specialized in the selection of digital music content, Spotify launched a personalized playlist service, called *Discover Weekly*. This playlist consisted of a selection of around two hours of music, offered every Monday and tailored on individual users' tastes thanks to the analysis of big data through a dedicated system of artificial intelligence and machine learning. The composition of playlists offered to listeners is clearly one of the core dimensions in which the power of music platforms like Spotify can be located, as playlists represent the main feature through which platforms such as Spotify put to work the "selection" of contents, a process recognized by van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) as a key mechanism through which platforms attempt to shape and control their sectors.

Consequently, a crucial dimension of inquiry in music platformization regards how the work of selection is performed, and how playlists are created. While Spotify offers musicians and labels a simple, generic description of how songs are selected to enter the strategic playlists composed by the platform, this process remains largely opaque. Indeed, as showed by Bonini and Gandini (2019), the outcome of this crucial work of gatekeeping done by the playlists is the outcome of a mix between, on the one hand, automated data coming from listeners' behaviours relating to engagement (such as listening duration or skip rates) and, on the other hand, an active curatorial work by the staff. There is therefore no method, or data available for an artist to know how tracks are placed or withdrawn from playlists. As a result, as Prey (2020, p. 3) argues, one direct consequence of the platform's mechanisms is that "music artists and record labels are growing increasingly dependent on plum playlist positions — playlists controlled by Spotify". In any case, far from being merely the outcome of an automated process performed by algorithms, the gatekeeping process represents an "enhanced" work of selection, in which professionals are helped by algorithms, big data and other tools, to be able to control content circulation in a powerful way, showing — as Bonini and Gandini (2019, p. 9) underline — how "the platform capitalistic model [is] potentially more efficient than industrial capitalism in transforming audience attention into data and data into commodities".

In this regard, we can also look at the way in which the early phase of adoption of blockchain-based platforms for music distribution have been largely influenced by pressures related to music financialization and further commodification of sonic content (Magaudda, 2018). The emergence of platforms distinctively based on blockchain, smart contracts and automated algorithms shows that these emerging technologies are remarkably shaped by the need to incorporate ownership and copyrights into protocols and digital formats, integrating music content even more into the automated flow of big data characterizing our hyper-connected society.

A final reflection worth noting concerns the situated consumption practices of platforms' users and, therefore, also on the possible forms of resistance that they can put in practice to counterbalance the strong power exerted by platforms through datafication and algorithmic selection. In a widely variegated music platform ecosystem, one basic possibility for consumers is to choose different platforms among the several available today in order to listen to music. Indeed, such platforms as Bandcamp or Soundcloud, alternative to mainstream services like Spotify, offer a different relationship with musicians and listeners, employing a different kind of

management of data, which is the result of a lower degree of dependence on financialization and marketing (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2019). These alternative platforms "have become the principal site for 'alternative' music", presenting "positive values and emancipatory aspirations", but, at the same time, "like older forms of alternative cultural production and distribution, these services are compromised and problematic", for instance in their struggles to be economically sustainable or in ambiguously translating their alternative ideologies into the technical features of the platforms (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2019, p. 10). The adoption of alternative music platforms together with other forms of tactical resistance against platforms' power (e.g. Siles et al., 2020) suggests that an alternative kind of digital music industry can be imagined and that, at least to some degree, consumers can always potentially put in practice autonomous patterns for the fruition of digital contents.

3 Platforms and Journalism

As the significant number of dedicated scholarly monographs and journal special issues published in the last very few years clearly suggests, the impact of digital platforms in the field of journalism — that is, the complex and dynamic roles played by social media and platform companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google in the reconfiguration of the processes of news production, circulation, and consumption — constitutes both a central issue within the scholarly field of journalism studies as well as a key domain through which to investigate the wider platformization of contemporary culture and society.

In the following sections, a few major and interrelated research strands will be reconstructed. First of all, it is necessary to note that recent research on platforms and journalism has been struggling to strike a balance between, on the one hand, embracing — theoretically, empirically, and critically — elements of discontinuity and even radical technological change and, on the other hand, recognizing elements of continuity. In other words, the real weight of the impact of platformization in the field of journalism is still matter of debate. Indeed, the fact that algorithmic and data-driven platforms do not explicitly self-identify as such and are not often publicly perceived as media companies nor constitutive actors within the global news media ecosystem has somehow generated confusion and thus posed new interpretative challenges about their societal position, responsibility, accountability, and power.

In this context, there can be no doubt that the accelerated and impactful transformations of news media industries have stirred up innovative research on the specific forms and mechanisms of the platformization of journalism, that is, on news (and) *platforms* (e.g. Van Dijck et al., 2018; Rashidian et al., 2019; Bell et al., 2017; Paulussen et al., 2017), *algorithms and automation* (e.g. Thurman et al., 2019; Duguay, 2018), *audience metrics and analytics* (e.g. Christin, 2020; Carlson, 2018a; Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016) — readdressing long-debated yet newly relevant issues of journalism's *value and values* (e.g. Anderson, 2020; Van Dijck et al., 2018; Peters & Broersma, 2016). In particular, certain relevant research results show how news media organizations are becoming not only responsive to specific platform logics (embedded in concrete mechanisms such as metrics and analytics) but also more profoundly adaptable to the platforms' value hierarchies and their frequently redefined strategies — in what can be interpreted as a form of *institutional isomorphism* (Caplan & boyd, 2018). As a whole, on the basis of the reconstruction of major research strands on the topic, it could be argued that scholarly choices of privileged research objects on platforms and journalism have advanced by focusing more on political economic issues, organizational structures and technological aspects, and ar-

guably less on symbolic meanings and user practical experiences — as the conclusions of this section will suggest.

As a recent special issue reflexively claimed (Peters & Carlson, 2019), among the various interdisciplinary subfields of academic inquiry on culture and communication across the social sciences, journalism studies are arguably one of the subfields most commonly accustomed to researching and debating on issues of *change*. Presenting a variety of even contested epistemological positions on the ongoing, incremental, sometimes declared as "disruptive," technological (r)evolution,[1] journalism studies seem constitutively doomed to a persistently pre-paradigmatic stage characterized by a productively unstable balance between continuity and transformation. Over the last two decades, in particular, the pace of change and the reconfiguration of wide sectors of social and cultural life through new and constantly evolving digital media technologies have posed deep challenges to the field of journalism, revealing increasing complexities (Boczkowski & Anderson, 2014; Tong & Lo, 2017). In this context, on the one hand, there can be little doubt that "the *stability* of journalism's core — the idea that individuals associated with certain recognized and reliable enterprises are entrusted with collecting and disseminating information for the public good — *matters*" (Zelizer, 2019, p. 346, emphasis added), and arguably even more so in today's complex times and global crises. On the other hand, as it is now clear, the infrastructural organization of the current hegemonic platform ecosystem is founded on business models that focus specifically on valuable data extraction and processing, user profiling, and personalized targeted advertising. Such business models accordingly take form in the operational platform structure by symbiotically comprising the backstage of algorithmic systems and the frontstage of web interfaces, the latter of which are strategically designed to keep user engaged and to maximize their online presence and activity. As many authors have underlined over the last few years within critical accounts of major shifts regarding the convergence between digital media practices and data extraction and analysis technologies at the core of the contemporary capitalistic shaping of the social order, these apparently inextricable and inescapable platform value-creating mechanisms end up at odds with both individual privacy and several foundational societal and professional values (Turow & Couldry, 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Zuboff, 2019) — as has become evident in the journalistic field over the last decade.

In fact, and not by chance, among the major sectors impacted by the process of platformization, Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal's timely book (2018) focuses first on news and journalism. Contextualizing the recent digital evolutions of the news field through the book's conceptual framework, built around the three key platform mechanisms of datafication, commodification, and selection, the authors define the increasingly extensive process of platformization of news as a contested process involving a number of actors and reciprocal tensions between, on the one hand, infrastructural platforms "making extensive efforts to become central nodes in the production, circulation, and commodification of news by developing new data services and news-related features", and, on the other hand, "a wide variety of online news content producers — from legacy media organizations to producers of disinformation" that "target online platforms to distribute and monetize their content". As a consequence, such a tension most significantly implies that "the production of news becomes progressively tailored to obey the mechanisms and organizing principles driving the platform ecosystem", while for a number of professional, economic and juridical reasons the platforms explicitly distance themselves from any official recognition of "their editorial function and responsibility in the news sphere". According to

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1. On the digital "disruption" of journalism, see Hansen (2020). On the digital "(r)evolution" of photojournalism, see Solaroli (2017).

the authors, these economic and technological developments are reshaping not only practices of production, distribution and consumption, but most relevantly socially constructed core public values — such as journalistic independence as well as accurate and comprehensive news coverage — that have historically defined journalism's professional identity and societal role in democratic politics. In other words, with the increasingly personalized, profiled and targeted practices of news media consumption, which can also isolate platform and social media users within social and ideological filter bubbles, "the realization of such values comes under pressure in the platform ecosystem", where platforms, social media and online search engines undermine both "the control of news organizations over the selection of news" and, fundamentally, "the privileged position of professional journalism" (Van Dijck et al., 2018, pp. 50–53; see also Schiffrin, 2021).

A relevant part of the scholarly discussion on platform journalism focuses on the multiple and interrelated relationships between new(s) strategies of content format curation and audience engagement based on digital metrics and analytics. Drawing on previous research (e.g. Anderson, 2011; Usher, 2013), Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) recall that "due to the many different paths through which today's audiences consume news and leave a data trail, a wealth of audience metrics have become available, spawning a number of measurement and data services", as it has become "essential for news organizations to trace how each piece of separate content circulates online", even if, in terms of public value, "a fully data-driven news production and distribution process potentially conflicts with journalistic independence and comprehensive news coverage, putting additional commercial pressure on journalists to produce content that triggers user engagement", creating path dependencies through which the data infrastructures of the larger platforms can eventually "shape the scope of editorial decision-making […] in terms of topics to focus on and reconfiguring the presentation of content" — for example, helping professional journalists to "surface relevant trends, photos, videos and posts from Facebook and Instagram" (Van Dijck et al., 2018, pp. 54–55).

In other words, the digital platformization of news making and consumption necessarily implies a potentially major shift from the foundational principle of (relative) editorial autonomy pertaining to the work of professional journalists as cultural intermediaries (e.g. Matthews, 2014) to an increasingly data-driven, socio-technological personalized selection model shaped by online user behaviors and news consumers' assumedly preferred interests (e.g. Nielsen & Ganter, 2018). As it is becoming clear, such a shift eventually has practical consequences also on the production, design and circulation of news contents, formats and types (e.g. infotainment and breaking news) that can acquire visibility and even virality by soliciting emotional responses and augmenting quantifiable online engagement (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 65) — in digital jargon, "capturing" or "hooking" (hence monetizing) users while monitoring their "sentiment" — thus also requiring renewed analytical frameworks to study the enduring yet increasingly debated role of emotions in the platform society and the affective dimension of digital journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

In all its technological and professional peculiarities as well as economic and cultural implications, such a shift could actually be interpreted as the last digital step in a much longer historical trajectory of journalism's orientation towards the heteronomous pole of the field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 2005; Benson & Neveu, 2005) — a step that consequentially implies a reshaping of its own digital "form of news" (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001), and that would thus greatly benefit from further multidimensional and critical empirical research on the processes, effects, and meanings of news platformization at the intersection of field dynamics, online news formal design patterns, and news' emotional consumption.

Most recently, empirical research on platforms and journalism has particularly focused on different dimensions of the shifting balance between professional journalists and platform algorithms, as well as on the connected and increasingly practical and symbolic relevance of digital audience metrics and analytics. Within the journalistic field, the increasing possibility and need to process huge amounts of digital data highlight the growing, yet hardly visible, relevance of algorithms and various mechanisms of automation in the process of news production, selection and distribution. Among their many emerging uses, algorithms are in fact increasingly adopted in newsrooms to identify and filter newsworthy contents on digital platforms, while a variety of automated mechanisms can contribute to editorial choices based also on news consumers' profiles and online behavior — though clearly not without technical and cultural failures and, most relevantly, not without wider increasing ethic-political implications (Thurman et al., 2019; Gillespie, 2020). The algorithmic processing of valuable data extracted by online user activity can support journalistic organizations in tailoring their contents and targeting audiences on platforms — giving web analytics companies from outside the journalistic field increasing power and influence on the newsmaking process (Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018; Petre, 2018).

Journalism today is not systematically driven by algorithms and audience metrics, but it can certainly be argued that, with the rise of digital platforms, over the last decade algorithms and various forms of audience quantification have ubiquitously proliferated and acquired increasing transformative prominence within the journalistic field (Carlson, 2018b; Anderson, 2011) — extending what already in the mid-nineties Bourdieu (2005, p. 43) aptly defined as the "audience ratings mentality" increasingly governing the journalistic field under the pressing forces of commercial heteronomy (see also Wang, 2018). Such a prominence is based on the constitutive tension between, on the one side, the possibility for news audiences to participate and be "engaged" with through platforms, as well as for journalists to understand more of their audience, and, on the other side, the commodification of audiences made possible by online traceable data, through which they eventually become individually targetable and fundamentally reduced to mere valuable "profiles". Furthermore, under pressures for productivity and in seeking web traffic journalists can fall into forms of professional and cognitive dependency on metrics outputs — sometimes discursively framed even as "click hysteria" (Steen-Johnsen et al., 2016).

In this context, the recent empirical work on the "metrics at work" in the journalistic field by Christin (2020) provides a number of valuable insights that can aid us in going beyond merely descriptive dichotomies of audience analytics in order to investigate the differently situated uses and negotiated meaning-making processes around algorithms and digital metrics — as practical digital tools and also dense cultural symbols — as well as their impact on professional identities and modes of evaluation in contemporary digital journalism. The ethnographic method and comparative design of the research — carried out also through significant in-depth fieldworks within offices of news websites in the US and France — as well as the theoretical framework — that enriches more traditional Bourdieusian analysis of the journalistic field with an empirical attention to the relationships between journalists and their (algorithmic) publics — allow us also to recognize important cultural differences between the two national journalistic fields, while reconstructing and interpreting the workings of globally available digital metrics in practice (see also Christin & Petre, 2020).

On this basis, it is critically important to note that the changes to traditional news editorial practices, standards of evaluation, and audience engagement strategies such as those enacted by digital metrics and analytics take place in a platformized media environment in which the

rules of the game and the spaces of opportunities often come to be performatively defined by these same platforms. In other words, news media organizations do not simply respond to the metrics and analytics; they also tend to adapt to the platforms' value hierarchies and their frequently re-updated strategies — in what, drawing on DiMaggio and Powell (1983), and focusing on the primary role of Facebook within the news media ecosystem, Caplan and Boyd (2018) have interpreted as a form of institutional isomorphism. As they write,

> Facebook itself has used its News Feed algorithm, and changes being made to it, to exert powerful coercive pressures on organizations operating within its walls. Evidence that news media organizations are subject to the informal and formal pressures Facebook's platform places upon them can be seen in their relative success following changes to Facebook's News Feed algorithm. Publishers that had early success in News Feed effectively subsumed their own organizational practices to the logic of Facebook's algorithms (Caplan & boyd, 2018, p. 5).

However, over the last very few years, a significant number of frequent changes in the algorithmic mechanisms and platform strategies of Facebook — such as its choice in January of 2018 to favor updates from friends and family and give less priority to publisher posts on the News Feed — brought relevant drops in traffic and advertising revenues for news media organizations. Not by chance, since 2019, and following the expansion of such projects as the Google's Digital News Initiative, Google and Facebook have started to significantly fund various (particularly local) news initiatives. As a consequence, today, on the one hand, "platforms are more powerful than ever. Over time, they have come to control the online information ecosystem and, increasingly, in the case of Facebook and Google, are among the news industry's top funders"; on the other hand, "the lesson of platform unreliability, particularly when it comes to revenue, has never been more clear to publishers [...] From the rise of paywalls and reader revenue initiatives to the diversification of revenue streams through live events and podcasts, publishers are attempting to regain control over the future of their businesses" (Rashidian & al., 2019, pp. 5–8).

Finally, on the basis of this reconstruction of the state of the art, it becomes clear that, within the rapidly expanding scholarly literature on platforms and journalism, the bulk of research has focused on the multiple effects of algorithms, automation and audience metrics and on the wider digital transformation of news production, leaving relatively aside the investigation of news consumption. Over the last few years, a number of authors have highlighted the urgency of giving proper analytical and empirical attention to the changing practices, forms and motivations of news consumption, as well as to the crucial object itself — in other words, what is socially and culturally considered, consumed, and valued as news today (e.g. Waisbord, 2019; Peters & Witschge, 2015). Such a form of attention has been taking shape more recently (e.g. Picone, 2016; Larsson, 2018; Mukerjee et al., 2018; Peters & Broersma, 2019), advancing the call for an "audience turn" in digital journalism studies, and suggesting the relevant possibility to further explore the question of what constitutes meaningful news user experience and engagement today (Meijer & Kormelink, 2020) — a question with relevant political and cultural implications. In Zelizer's words:

> the widespread reliance in digital journalism on a certain kind of audience metrics — exemplified by clicks, pageviews, likes, shares, retweets and followers — leaves unclear how to discern or measure participation. As its invocation in digital journalism ranges across sheer digital activity, time spent on particular sites, comprehension, learning and social mobilization, it is clear, as Poindexter (2012) pointed

out in her study of millennial news users, that engagement without a connection to broader values often leads to disengagement and disinterest (Zelizer, 2019, p. 348).

4   Platforms, Photography and Visual Culture

If compared with music and journalism, photography and visual culture could certainly be argued to represent the most recently emerging domain of inquiry for platform studies. Over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the large-scale digitalization of processes of visual production and consumption and the global rise of visual social media have been challenging and redefining ways of seeing, social practices, and cultural expectations in a variety of professional fields and in wider public visual culture. Over the last very few years, in particular the process of platformization has had a number of still largely unexplored effects, at different levels, on the everyday production, circulation, and consumption of networked images. Concluding a recent historical reconstruction of photography as a cultural industry, Frosh (2020) has indeed suggested that:

> Probably for the first time in its history, photography has shifted operations away from a "publication" model based on the value accrued through the sale of images or image-making technologies, replacing it with a computationally enhanced "broadcast" or "network" system focused on new commodities: viewer data, viewer attention and the prediction of future viewer behavior [...] an epochal shift from the mass manufacture of pictures to the mass processing of viewers (Frosh, 2020, p. 269).

In order to start grasping the degrees of innovation and (dis)continuity related to the ongoing process of platformization of visual cultural industries, the next few sections will focus on some of the major issues emerging within the scholarly state of the art — in particular, on the ways in which the circulation of photographs is increasingly enacted through such online platforms as Instagram (clearly, even beyond the practice of *selfies*); on the aesthetics of visual communication, which is increasingly subjected to patterns of platform templatization and forms of platform vernaculars; and additionally on such socially constructed values as visual objectivity and authenticity, historically related to the practice of photography within a variety of professional fields (e.g. news and documentaries) but which are now increasingly reshaped and interwoven with data-driven and algorithmic mechanisms within the platformized visual media environment.

It is worth noting that today, almost sixty years since Bourdieu (1990[1965]) led his pioneering research team to empirically investigate the class-based and context-dependent social uses and meanings of (analogue) photography, the symbolic boundaries and overall extension of what was at that time defined as the "photographable" domain has come to be broadened, while the socially constructed and ritualized "occasions for taking photographs" have turned out to be not just mediated but vastly multiplied, ordinarily experimented, even strategically induced. "Since the beginning of the new millennium", as rightly observed by Van Dijck (2008, p. 60), "cameras have increasingly served as tools for mediating everyday experiences other than rituals or ceremonial moments". The everyday circulation of networked images and the uses of visual social media platforms to communicate and share contents and experiences — and thus to manage and expand interactions and relationships, to acquire and debate information and knowledge, and to build and promote (branded) identities — have been argued to constitute

an increasing shift toward an "ubiquitous" (Hand, 2012), "conversational" (Gunthert, 2014), and "social (media)" (Jurgenson, 2019) character of contemporary photographs and images.

Among the visual social media platforms that have emerged over the last decade, Instagram has proved particularly successful, through its frequent changes and updates (even those implemented in imitation of other platforms' existing features, including the gradual introduction of videos and "stories") as well as its consistent growth.[2] In 2016, Instagram made a crucial shift from displaying posts on user feeds in chronological order to a data-driven and algorithmically-shaped model based on criteria designed to provide a more personalized (that is, commodified and targeted) visual experience. As a central actor within the contemporary platform ecosystem, Instagram has been a revealing and sometimes driving force in a number of wider trends in online social experience and visual communication, raising a number of questions on the ongoing platformization of visual cultural production and consumption, and thus becoming, over the last few years, the object of increasing scholarly attention (Manovich, 2017; Serafinelli, 2018; Leaver et al., 2020; Caliandro & Graham, 2020).

An initial and prolific strand of research on visual social media, Instagram, and contemporary visual culture has focused on the social practice and cultural object of the selfie, investigated also in relation to the increasing public attention on such a rapidly diffusing trend of visual self-representation and promotion (Senft & Baym, 2015; Warfield et al., 2016; Peraica, 2017; Eckel et al., 2018; Tiidenberg, 2018). Going beyond naive debates on (youth) narcissism, and often theoretically framing the selfie as a diversified reaction to the so-called "context collapse" (Marwick & boyd, 2011), such research has addressed a variety of dimensions, sub-genres and case studies, from the selfie as a form of expressive empowerment for specific subcultures and social groups (including migrants and refugees, e.g. Serafinelli, 2016; Chouliaraki, 2017), to wider trends on selfies by/with politicians or celebrities (e.g. Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016; Karadimitriou & Veneti, 2016), and to large quantitative explorations of selfies' visual-aesthetic patterns (Manovich & Tifentale, 2015).[3]

Over the years, even beyond selfies, major scholarly attention has been somewhat predictably devoted to the dimension of aesthetics, and its shifting forms in relation to multiple social and professional practices of platform users. As a renewed step in a longer process of aesthetization of cultural production, the visual communication and online sharing of social experiences via smartphones and visual social media had initially been addressed by focusing on Instagram image filters — which simulated, for example, old Kodak Instamatic or Polaroid-like analogue film textures and borders — and the vintage and retro-aesthetic appeal of such imagery. According to Jurgenson (2019), these "filtered images conjured a sense of special realness amid the mass of digital photos. Faux-vintage photos placed one's self and one's digitally mediated present into the context of the past and its overtones of the authentic, the important, and the real" (Jurgenson, 2019, p. 6), since "visual communication is increasingly accommodating the sharing of experience in addition to and through the mechanism of recording information", and thus "social photography, even or especially those

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2. Founded in 2010 and acquired by Facebook in 2012 (for one billion dollars), in 2018 Instagram declared itself to have reached one billion monthly active users.

3. In what might be seen as a classic framing exercise, on the one hand it is argued that "the prominence of the selfie as a genre on Instagram — over 366 million posts tagged with #selfie as at November 2018 — means that is important to explore as part of the aesthetics and vernacular of the platform" (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 67), while, on the other hand, as the counting goes, "of approximately 40 billion photos posted on Instagram to date, only 282 million are selfies — just 0.7%. Thus, for all its zeitgeisty appeal, the selfie is in fact a niche phenomenon in the larger context of Instagram genres" (Caliandro & Graham, 2020, p. 1) — highlighting, as a consequence, the need to study Instagram even beyond selfies.

photos that are filtered and framed and digitally augmented, can succeed at storytelling rather than fail at exactitude" (Jurgenson, 2019, p. 17).

However, over the years and increasingly in the second half of the 2010s, "the retro-specific aesthetic was minimized in comparison with the broader visual opportunities and possibilities of Instagram, as its user base grew and the uses of the platform expanded" (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 39). On the basis of an empirical research on Instagram users, Serafinelli (2018) claims that "users' way of viewing the world has changed since their first approach to Instagram, and this shows how Instagram alters the visual perception and experience of the surroundings"; more specifically, the progressive use of the platform reveals "two types of changes: one is related to the improvement of photographic skills and the other is related to the development of the connection with the surroundings". In other words, Instagram users can tend to search for and create "Insta-worthy" photo-opportunities, and such an extended visual attention can even change their attitudes towards and during events (Serafinelli, 2018, pp. 67–69) — which come to be experienced also, as the user jargon goes (and even a number of recent popular culture products, from movies to pop songs, recall), "for the gram".

At the same time, the platformized visual economy of attention is argued to have evolved on the basis of a social process of algorithmically-driven *visual templatability*: "Instagram use has shifted from a focus on filters to an era of templatability where new aesthetic and communication norms are established by celebrities and Influencers that ripple through the platform, establishing the fleeting vernacular norms of the day" (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 6). Reciprocally, such a "seeming dominance of similar and repetitive visual stylings shows a growing logic of templatability driven by the metrics and algorithms driving Instagram today" (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 191). As a consequence, Instagram visual culture takes the shapes of a *platform vernacular*, or better a repertoire of multiple platform vernaculars, defined as a platform's "own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics" which "emerge from the affordances" (built into the hardware and software architecture of the platform) "and the ways they are appropriated and performed in practice" by its users, on the basis of their own communicative habits and goals (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 257). Such a definition recalls earlier interpretative explorations of "new" visual media such as PowerPoint, whose affordances have made possible repertoires of cognitive styles and expressive formats, thus being — as showed by Stark and Paravel (2008) — "pre-scriptive" in the sense that they can contribute to pre-form (that is, limitedly enabling, not clearly determining) the performance of users.

On this basis, it becomes important to embrace notions of templatization with a degree of caution and to empirically reformulate them in more detail on the basis of different social and cultural contexts — as experimented, for example, in early work on Instagram by Manovich (2017), which employed large scale computational and qualitative analyses of differences in subjects, techniques and styles of Instagram photographs from different global cities using very large image samples, and suggesting that "the subjects and styles of photographs are significantly influenced by social, cultural, and aesthetic values of a given location or demographic" (Manovich, 2017, p. 26).

In the case of Instagram, the issue of visual templatability surely opens up a number of possible research questions, however "very little research on specific Instagram sub-vernaculars has been carried out so far [...] both within and across disparate fields" (Caliandro & Graham, 2020, p. 2). Such research ideas might be fruitfully developed, and some interesting leads could possibly derive from recent explorations, for example, of Instagram and street art (MacDowall, 2019), and Instagram and news photography.

In particular, it could be argued that the field of visual news production and consumption

had faced early on the coming changes of mobile photography, visual social media and digital platformization, in terms of both aesthetic shifts and multiplication of social actors and practices. For example, in the case of photojournalism, such correlated dichotomies as "amateur vs. professional" and "digital vs. analogue" have been discursively — and not without conflict — played out during at least the first decade of this century, in relation to the increasingly diffuse digital technologies, social media affordances and practices that allowed forms of "citizen photojournalism" and non-professional visual news making to become increasingly relevant and publicly visible. This was especially the case during certain major crises, from the Abu Ghraib scandal to the 7/7 London bombings and the so-called "Arab Spring," among others (e.g. Anden-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2011; Allan, 2017). The focus on (vintage) filters and retro-intensified aesthetics of Instagram (and others, such as Hipstamatic) directly addressed those dichotomies and had also great implications within wider and long-lasting debates on news photographic post-production and manipulation, thus raising renewed issues concerning photo-journalistic professionalism, authority, and, especially, notions of *authenticity* and *objectivity* (Alper, 2014; Borges-Rey, 2015; Solaroli, 2015a). Over the last fifteen years, many cases of contested, post-produced professional news photographs — including the professional debates which emerged after a square grid of four photographs taken in Afghanistan with the Hipstamatic app was published on the front page of the New York Times in 2010, later earning the staff photographer a Picture of the Year International award (Alper, 2014) — clearly showed the impact of such social, professional, and technological changes on historical-epistemological tensions concerning the professional ideal of visual news "objectivity" and the social process of construction of aesthetic conventions and professional-ethic standards in photojournalism, especially among professional photojournalists adopting new visual technologies and platforms (Solaroli, 2015a).[4]

More recently, the concept of *mechanical objectivity* has been employed to refer to accepted conventions and professional ideals of both photojournalism and contemporary platform news algorithms (Carlson, 2019). The promise of mechanical objectivity can in fact be defined as "the assumption of the epistemic utility of mechanical operations, whether overtly expressed" as in the case of news photography, "or implicitly embedded in practice" as in the "more recent rise of algorithmic practices and automated systems throughout the news-making process", playing "an increasingly central role in what audiences see" (Carlson, 2019, p. 2). However, *algorithmic objectivity* (Gillespie, 2014) can have also dark sides, or at least unexpected and constraining consequences. A major and quite revealing case occurred in 2016. As Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal (2018, p. 44) recall, "when Facebook repeatedly deleted the iconic 'Terror of War' picture of a fleeing naked child after a napalm bombing during the Vietnam War, its removal triggered controversy", because it represented the output of a process of content moderation that did not allow the online publication of images of nudity, yet failing to distinguish between a generic image of child pornography and one of the most widely known iconic news photographs of the last century. As the example clearly shows, the constantly evolving strategies and norms of content moderation employed by such platforms as Facebook and Instagram

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4. As an anecdote revealing the shifting aesthetic standards and professional ideals but also the confusions and complexities of this historical phase, it would be enough to recall that, during the wide debates regarding the photo that won the prestigious World Press Photo of the Year award in 2013, which had been legitimately post-produced with innovative software technologies yet accused of illegitimate photo manipulation, an expert who had been entrusted to evaluate it eventually referred to its affective visual enhancement by defining the photograph's final shape as "Instagram-y" — further confirming the impact of the platform on visual culture (Solaroli, 2015a).

can deeply affect the forms and indeed possibilities of the visual news process, struggling with multiple historical and cultural specificities. In this case, only after extensive online reactions, Facebook recognized the importance of the image beyond the fact that it would normally violate the platform's standards. Likewise, Instagram initially banned every kind of nudity but, especially after wide online outcries for images of breastfeeding mothers being removed (Locatelli, 2017), it revised its guidelines allowing nudity in specific cases, including photos of paintings and sculptures, yet not in other, often contested, cases (Caldeira et al., 2018; Leaver et al., 2020).

Interestingly, the social and algorithmically automated forms and rules of content moderation that initially blocked the online diffusion of the famous Vietnam war's iconic news photograph might also imply, "ironically, that if such picture were taken today, it could no longer become iconic through a system of news selection dominated by Facebook and platforms with similar community standards" (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 64) — raising questions on the possible dynamics and forms of visual cultural iconicity and iconic power in the platform society, in relation to the digital inflation of potential icons, the algorithmically driven selection of heightened visual contents, and the status and meaning of iconic images, defined not just by their content but also by their performative effects and the platformized networks of relations that come to take shape around and through them (Hariman & Lucaites, 2018; Mortensen et al., 2017; Dahmen & Morrison, 2016; Solaroli, 2015b).

Finally, Instagram is increasingly acquiring a significant journalistic value for professionals and organizations as a platform for detecting potentially newsworthy topics and simultaneously promoting visual news contents. As a platform for potential visual news consumption, however, it is claimed to be increasingly subjected to the logic of templatability that could reduce serendipitous user explorations — apparently confirming that "even though platforms enable the circulation of a wide range of cultural products and forms of expression, platformization is not necessarily conducive to a diverse cultural landscape and democratic public sphere" (Poell, 2020, p. 654). According to Leaver, Highfield and Abidin (2020, p. 214),

> for all Instagram's success, or indeed, because of it, the experience of Instagram is increasingly challenged by the logic of templatability which is evident across the platform [...] Instagram's drive to serve metrics for Influencers and advertisers has meant both are increasingly behaving in similar ways [...] to crafting content which maximizes the attention of Instagram's algorithms. While Instagram's Discover pages are meant to highlight new material for users, the multiple signals of other users' comments and likes, and machine vision algorithms looking for aesthetically similar content, mean Discover is largely populated with content *similar* to material a user has already seen, greatly reducing the serendipity and spontaneity of exploring Instagram.

As showed by the last Digital News Report of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, in a variety of countries and across age groups the use of Instagram for news has doubled over the last two years, with the platform looking likely to overtake Twitter soon in this regard (Newman et al., 2020). However, beyond initial exceptions (e.g. Towner & Munoz, 2020; Larsson, 2018; see also Koliska & Roberts, 2015), as a visual news platform Instagram is still largely uninvestigated. Future research projects will necessarily have to take into account the distinctive platform logics and mechanisms so far reconstructed, as well as new, challenging, epistemological and methodological issues concerning digital visual research design strategies

(e.g. Faulkner et al., 2018; Rogers, 2018; Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Lindholm et al., 2020; Pearce et al., 2020; Manovich, 2020).

5   Looking Ahead for Future Research Paths

This review essay aimed at reconstructing some of the major research paths, results, and on-going challenges within the framework of the platform society and in relation to key cultural industry sectors. To conclude this overview, on the basis of the research patterns so far addressed, we would like to outline three domains that we believe to be, among others, deeply relevant for possible future research in this field. These areas of further necessary inquiry deal with *aesthetics*, *value(s)*, and *users*.

Firstly, such a wide, deep and ongoing digital transformation implies a variety of relevant social and cultural implications that more or less directly affect and shape the aesthetic forms, design patterns and more or less distinctive or hybrid genre categories of platformized cultural objects: from the length and structure of successful songs on Spotify, to the writing and positioning of specific types of titles for boosting vastly read online news articles — as recently observed, for example, by Hindman (2018) and Christin (2020) — to the role of images in platform journalism, including the visual dimension of fake news, and to Instagram's platform vernaculars that meet a logic of visual templatability. If early efforts to understand the relationships between digital platforms and cultural production have mostly been devoted to outlining the mechanisms of distribution, then new research directions should also be linked to the analyses of languages, aesthetics and symbolic forms, which would necessarily benefit from interdisciplinary frameworks and innovative methodological choices.

Secondly, the deeply platformized reconfiguration of digital cultural industries would critically require further investigation of the changes in terms of value and values within different cultural fields. In other words, we invite scholars to look both at how the economic and symbolic value of culture is changing, and the changing relevance of cultural products in social lives and within household moral economies, including the social experiences that platformized culture is able to catalyze and trigger. On the one hand, such as in the case of music, and partially in journalism, digitalized content has been transformed from more or less concrete objects to be purchased (and stored) into services that people are to some degree willing to subscribe to; on the other hand, today the social value of culture is arguably at stake, as it is exemplified also by the discursive tensions around innovation and crisis that repeatedly frame professional journalism. At the same time, the hierarchies of value within specific fields of cultural production might be undergoing processes of reshaping in the new platformized media environment, and as a consequence future research on platforms and cultural industries should pay particular attention to issues of performance of value (see Stark, 2020).

Finally, as this paper has showed, research on platforms and cultural industry sectors has not yet been consistently and systematically attentive to the dimension of consumption. On this basis, it could be argued that one more crucial domain that might be further empirically investigated deals with the situated social and cognitive practices, and performative experiences, enacted by platforms' users. In this area of inquiry, it might be potentially revealing to focus also on patterns of sub-cultural consumption and tactics of platform power counterbalance, through which users can articulate alternative meanings and advance critical forms of symbolic resistance to mainstream forms of platformized culture. Initial examples include efforts to protest against algorithmic personalization, such as creative attempts at "playing against" or "gaming" Spotify's or Instagram's algorithmic systems, or even practices of digital disconnec-

tion (e.g. Petre et al., 2019; Mahnke, 2019; O'Meara, 2019; Trerè et al., 2020). Within social sciences, media studies and cultural studies, the wide area of scholarly research on consumption has a long history, lessons from which it could be possible to benefit in order to mobilize and innovate methods and concepts to address contemporary digital cultural user experience — even in its political implications. A few years ago, in an influential collective debate on the promise of online participation, José Van Dijck ended up asking:

> The role of users requires as much painstaking research as the role of platform owners. How much can, do, and should they understand about social media dynamics and their connective logic? In a world that is increasingly governed by high-tech systems operated by specialized info-engineers, what level of understanding is attainable for middle-class users who are well educated and willing to engage, but unaware of the powerful mechanisms guiding them? (Clark et al., 2014, p. 1449).

We believe that this is a question still worth being asked, even extended, and above all answered, in today's platform society.

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Paolo Magaudda: Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padua (Italy)

🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0830-8299

✉ paolo.magaudda@unipd.it; ⤤ https://www.pastis-research.eu/paolo-magaudda/

Paolo Magaudda is an Assistant Professor of Sociology of Culture and Communication in the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology at the University of Padova. His research interests regard the relationship between society, culture and technology, and his principal fields are science & technology studies, media studies, consumer studies and sound studies. Among other books, he published *History of Digital Media. A Global and Intermedia Perspective* (Routledge, 2018, with G. Balbi).

Marco Solaroli: Department of the Arts, University of Bologna (Italy)

🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5433-1540

✉ marco.solaroli@unibo.it; ⤤ https://www.unibo.it/faculty/marco.solaroli

Marco Solaroli is an Assistant Professor of Sociology of Culture and Communication in the Department of the Arts at the University of Bologna. His research interests reside at the intersection of cultural sociology, visual culture, and journalism studies, focusing on cultural production, innovation, and consecration in the fields of visual journalism, digital photography, and popular music.