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Rodgers, Scott (2021) The duality of platforms as infrastructures for urban politics. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 18 (4), pp. 404-412. ISSN 1479-1420.

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The Duality of Platforms as Infrastructures for Urban Politics

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Abstract

Scholarship has recently sprouted up around the notion of ‘platform urbanism.’ In this essay, I outline an approach to the specifically communicative politics emerging through, and in relation to, platform infrastructures by drawing on research and observations in London, UK. Defending a phenomenological perspective, which sidesteps an *a priori* definition of platforms or infrastructures, I put forward a way of thinking about the experiential duality of platforms for urban politics. Here, platform infrastructures can appear as both: emergent objects of urban political concern; and withdrawn media, shaping spatial experience and the political meanings that are made of those spaces.

Keywords:

communication, infrastructure, London, platforms, urban politics

Published as:

Rodgers S (2021) The duality of platforms as infrastructures for urban politics.

Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies 18(4): 404–412. DOI:

[10.1080/14791420.2021.1995616](https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2021.1995616).

Introduction

Recent years have seen scholarship sprout up around the notion of ‘platform urbanism.’¹ This growing body of research is currently more concentrated in urban studies and geography than media and cultural studies, and in many cases closely tied to the now-extensive literature on smart cities. The platforms in question for this field of study are the relatively discrete, digitally-mediated, and data-driven applications, services, and companies reshaping particular sectors or areas of urban life, notably accommodation, transportation, food logistics, real estate, and of course communication. Sarah Barns,² probably the first and foremost scholar to use the term, observes how ‘platform urbanism’ has principally framed three areas of critical research, into how: (1) digital platforms are accelerating capital accumulation via the commodification of urban data;³ (2) processes of platform-based urban data extraction appear to operate without meaningful individual or social contracts of consent;⁴ and (3) platforms, as translocal companies and technological ecosystems, present urban governance problems for local jurisdictions, struggling to encourage or compel such entities to serve public values and the common good.⁵ Barns also suggests,⁶ however, a fourth line of research that places platform urbanism more clearly into the domain of urban communication studies: how platforms shape socio-spatial experience and, as I have argued in my own collaborative work, provide new environments for articulating urban politics.⁷

In this essay, I draw on research and observations of London, UK to outline an approach to the specifically communicative politics of platform urbanism. My main conceptual lens will be to see platforms as infrastructures. In a recent intervention, Hesmondhalgh has argued that, in becoming a fashionable concept, ‘infrastructure’ has increasingly been used in vague or banal ways, and begun to lose its analytical value.⁸ The critique rests on one of Hesmondhalgh’s considerable strengths: keen attention to definitional specificity. And yet, I will defend an approach to platform infrastructure that does not require

an *a priori* definition. Following Dourish and Bell, I take a phenomenological perspective, which emphasises an experiential duality where infrastructure appears as both: emergent objects of urban political concern; and withdrawn media, shaping spatial experience and the political meanings that are made of those spaces.⁹

Like infrastructure, the terms ‘platform’ and ‘urban’ are often invoked vaguely. Nevertheless, the specificity of ‘platform’ has received some attention, and is usually connected to either: a business model based on commodifying extracted user data;¹⁰ a software architecture mediating data flows across external websites, apps, and increasingly physical infrastructures;¹¹ or a specific regulatory problem defined by the combination of these two preceding qualities.¹² And yet, Gillespie’s remarks from a decade ago around the ambiguity of ‘platform’ in ordinary talk also remain relevant.¹³ This ambiguity allows platform companies to be equivocal about their responsibilities (e.g. is Facebook a content publisher, or a neutral communication venue?), while at the same time creating an elusive object for political actors and regulators (e.g. is Airbnb a property company, or a neutral real estate app?).

Contemporary urban political research, meanwhile, often tends to be quite loose definitionally—at least in comparison with classic 1970s theories of urban politics, which often centred on asking: what makes politics specifically ‘urban’? While contemporary research on urban politics still very often anchors its analyses on spatial concepts, claims about the singular discreteness of the urban as a scale of politics are rarer.¹⁴ There has, in other words, been a breakdown in the myth of ‘the city’ or ‘the urban.’ In some respects, this is a productive development underscoring an increasingly shared recognition amongst scholars, planners, governments, and welfare providers that city life is unpredictable, and any representations of ‘urban’ conditions involve situated perspectives and interests.¹⁵

The relative indeterminacy of ‘platform’ and ‘urban’ mirrors the indeterminacy of both

media studies' and urban studies' key objects ('media' and 'urban').¹⁶ But these ambiguities arguably have productive dimensions helping to inspire combinative and interdisciplinary endeavours such as 'urban media studies'¹⁷ and 'geomedia studies.'¹⁸ I would like to suggest that 'infrastructure'—despite its fashionable status and tendency for being invoked with excessive vagueness—is a useful intersectional term for studying the specifically communicative politics of platform urbanism.¹⁹ Let me briefly expand on how by revisiting the phenomenological perspective I outlined earlier on the experiential duality of infrastructure.

According to Plantin et al., platforms are increasingly converging or swapping properties with physical infrastructures.²⁰ While acknowledging experiential approaches, their analysis arguably emphasises studying the histories of infrastructures as large-scale technical systems. In other words, they focus on the material and technical composition of digital platforms as they have evolved and increasingly merged with other infrastructures. In debates around platform urbanism, this kind of analysis has often led to a focus on the translocal nature of platforms, as entities introducing acontextual or standardized technical dynamics to local milieus, even possessing a kind of extra-national political-economic sovereignty.²¹ The urban politics at play often becomes one of local jurisdictions or publics jostling with translocal platforms around the access to and control of such infrastructures. Dourish and Bell would label this as a *socio-political* frame for approaching the politics of infrastructure.²² An *experiential* frame, by contrast, focuses “not so much on how infrastructures reflect institutional relationships but more on how they shape individual actions.”²³ This orientation, they suggest, leads to two senses of infrastructural politics: first, “the experience of infrastructure” in which infrastructures become a political concern when our everyday dependence on them becomes visible; and second, the “infrastructure of experience” in which infrastructures shape our spatial perception and in so doing create “a framework through

which our encounters with space take on meaning.”²⁴

Socio-political approaches to the politics of infrastructure are valuable and often revealing. Attending to the *experiential* duality of platform infrastructures, however, provides a way of thinking about the specifically communicative dimensions of their politics in urban contexts. It is a perspective that directs closer attention to how ‘platforms’ and ‘urban’ can emerge as objects of political problematisation, as well as how both are experiential venues from which such political claims can be articulated, seen, and heard. Drawing on my own research and teaching, in and on London, UK, I will now explore this duality of platforms in two corresponding ways: first, considering how London has been a setting for platform infrastructures to emerge as political concerns; and second, how platforms—and in particular social media—provide backgrounded infrastructures for articulating politics in relation to a London neighbourhood. Via these examples, I highlight both an urban politics of platform infrastructures and platform infrastructures of urban politics.

Urban politics of platform infrastructures

One prominent and more plainly ‘infrastructural’ instance of platforms being made politically visible in London have been debates around the status of Uber.²⁵ ‘Uber’ in London has meant at least three things, deliberately kept separate: Uber BV (UBV), the Netherlands-based company responsible for the Uber app; Uber London Limited (ULL), a UK company licensed by Transport for London (TfL) to operate minicabs, which have distinct regulatory status from London’s famous black cabs; and the estimated 30,000 drivers ULL treats as private contractors rather than employees, who use the UBV-owned app. The existence of ULL is necessary for Uber to operate within TfL’s regulatory structures but, since 2017, its operating licence has been notionally suspended based on concerns relating its loose contractual relationship with its drivers. Meanwhile, the existence of UBV allows Uber to

avoid 20% Value-Added Tax (VAT) payments to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), though since October 2020 this has also been put under scrutiny. The ambiguity around whether Uber should be considered a full-blown transportation company, or just a software app, has been considered legally not just in the UK, but also by the European Court of Justice.²⁶ The 2019 decision of UK Employment Tribunal judges (upheld by the UK Supreme Court in February 2021) expressed a scepticism about Uber's apparent duplicity (presenting itself to customers as a single operator, and to regulators as a loose commercial confederation) that arguably invoked an everyday understanding: "The notion that Uber in London is a mosaic of 30,000 small businesses linked by a common 'platform' is to our minds faintly ridiculous."²⁷ As Richardson argues, Uber is less interesting for its effects on cities as a discrete platform, but instead how it is made visible politically.²⁸ In contexts such as London, where the state has historically played a strong regulatory role, it stands in for broader reconfigurations of public and private qualities of urban transport infrastructures.

A less obviously political example is the establishment of London Datastore (LDS), a platform making dispersed urban data more accessible, explicitly under the banners of 'open data' and 'government as a platform.'²⁹ London has long been an urban setting from which masses of data have been generated. However, the accessibility and form of this data is inconsistent, partly due to London's fragmented municipal structure of 32 boroughs, each responsible for most local services. LDS was created in 2010 as one response by the Greater London Authority. It is an online portal that makes datasets available principally to government agencies, but also NGOs, journalists, private companies, and ordinary individuals. Indeed, as Tavmen shows, it has not only made publicly funded data accessible for public policy, but also private enterprise: the well-known Citymapper app, which delivers transportation options to users on the go, was built directly on open TfL data.³⁰ At the time of writing, LDS hosted 985 datasets, mostly from public agencies, which are free to download

and open license to use. The example of LDS is less obviously political, in that its existence is not especially contentious. Some analyses would consider this to be an instance of the ‘post-political,’ since it is a platform infrastructure put in place to address seemingly non-political, technocratic urban problems. As Beveridge and Koch argue, however, the problem with the post-political framing is that it relies on a binary where political agency is either heroic or anti-heroic.³¹ In my own analysis, the LDS platform is a political problematisation, making visible the primacy of data-driven urban policy and services. But this requires rejecting the notion that, for something to be properly ‘political,’ it must transgress a technocratic governance milieu from an extrinsic position.³²

A final example is the ways in which platforms are showing up as dependent features of urban economic and physical development. I have been conducting research into the transformation of 67-acres north of King’s Cross Station, once home to gasworks, railways, and heavy industry, into a comprehensively planned quarter of offices, retail, and residential property. Two of the most visible features of this new district are: its aesthetics, which mixes new architecture with industrial heritage, including reused fuel sheds, rebuilt wrought-iron gasworks, and a repurposed granary; and its occupants, which include Google, Facebook, and Samsung among other media brands (see Figure 1). The focus on heritage regeneration emerged through long process beginning in the late 1980s, which included successive planning proposals and consultations. The presence of the tech sector is more contingent on the timing of the construction. With its start delayed until 2008, awaiting the completion of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link into its St. Pancras Station terminus, platform companies like Google or Facebook likely became the most obvious largescale investors in the wake of the global financial crisis. My research is ongoing, and the degree to which the convergence between platform companies and King’s Cross is by accident or design remains unclear. Nevertheless, the explicit branding and curation of King’s Cross by its developers as a

‘cultural’ or ‘knowledge’ quarter suggests discourses akin to the ‘innovation complex’ Sharon Zukin has described in New York City.³³ It has attracted the large platform companies that eluded the backers of nearby ‘Tech City,’ a cluster of small- and medium-sized enterprises in Shoreditch, East London.³⁴ In so doing, King’s Cross has become emblematic of efforts to secure London’s global status in the tech sector post-Brexit. At the same time, more locally, the area’s new economic heft is increasingly seen as an encroaching threat for more deprived neighbouring areas such as Somers Town or the Barnsbury Estate.



Figure 1: Samsung’s 20,000 ft² ‘brand showcase’ at King’s Cross, London, designed by Heatherwick Studio and cantilevered over Coal Drops Yard, former fuel sheds now dubbed a ‘retail experience’ by developers. Source: Author.

Platform infrastructures of urban politics

Platform infrastructures, particularly social media, are in London (as in many other contexts) increasingly ordinary environments for articulating a politics of the city. I will refer here to three case studies, drawing in part on collaborative, empirical research I have undertaken between 2012 and 2019 in Walthamstow, East London.³⁵ The first was a campaign to ‘save’ Walthamstow’s historic EMD Granada Cinema. After closing in 2003, the cinema was purchased by the controversial United Church for the Kingdom of God (UCKG), a Brazilian-based Neo-Pentecostal evangelical church, which proposed to convert it for religious use. Though led by a local film society, the campaign morphed beyond devoted cinephilia. It became a more dispersed discourse about urban heritage, culture, and place touching on everything from the cinema’s architecture, interior design, history as a live music venue, and its place in Walthamstow’s broader cinematic provenance as an early locus for silent film. The second case was the ‘Mini-Holland’ transportation scheme of the London Borough of Waltham Forest. Funded by TfL, this scheme made both significant and smaller-scale changes to local roads in support of cycling and walking. To the surprise of the Council—and cycling advocates—the scheme was extremely divisive. It spurred animated public protests that attracted national media attention, and for many became a symbol of gentrification-via-cycling, linked with increasingly familiar political divides such as middle class/working class, elite/ordinary, young/old, and facts/emotions. The final case is the recent plan to expand Walthamstow’s central shopping mall with additional retail space and a series of residential towers. These plans were met with immediate controversy not only because of the proposed tower heights, but their lack of affordability. There were also deep concerns about preserving a public square and several mature lime trees, encroached upon by the development.

Social media platforms, broadly defined, were crucial background infrastructures across all three cases, firstly, for more organised practices of mobilizing, monitoring, and

convening. Predictably, hashtags formed one locus for mobilization. In 2012, activists mobilized using #saveourcinema and a similarly named Facebook group;³⁶ later, in 2018, many of the same activists coined #saveoursquare, publicly extolling a connection between the development plans for the central shopping mall and the earlier, successful campaign to save the EMD Granada Cinema. Social media were not only used towards mobilizing, but also for practices of monitoring. In the case of the EMD Granada Cinema, for instance, Twitter was often a vector for updates on the minutiae of decisions, appeals, and Council or even Parliamentary debates. Heritage preservationists used YouTube to document water damage to the cinema's interior and exterior. Others created custom Google maps, contrasting numerous churches across the Borough against the absence of a cinema. While polarised exchanges related to the 'Mini-Holland' primarily unfolded through local Facebook Groups, Waltham Forest Council sought to convene more consensual publics through Commonplace, a dedicated consultation platform produced by a London-based tech start-up. Commonplace gives Councils a real-time project dashboard and the ability to present projects and consultations as they choose; however, as a Commonplace client, the Council also accepts terms and conditions that cede control over the resulting, publicly displayed map interface showing user comments.

As important as such organised practices were, social media were also a crucial backdrop for more everyday kinds of experiencing, expressing, and conjecturing. Users tend to access social media not via desk-based computers, but rather on the go, via mobile technologies. And partly because of this, social media experience is interwoven with users' everyday life. This, we found, could at least partly explain the highly antagonistic nature of exchanges around the Mini Holland cycling scheme on local Facebook Groups. In making their perspectives known, or sharing content, users often appeared to be articulating, maintaining, or defending their identity at the same moment. Also evident were various kinds of

humoristic, insider riffing in which users both classified themselves and others. For example, in the case of the EMD Granada Cinema, members of UCKG were often ridiculed on Twitter with offhand terms such as ‘creepy,’ ‘crazy,’ ‘cult,’ ‘religious loonies,’ ‘invaders,’ and ‘mad;’ their apparent ‘cinema hating’ compared ludicrously with the far-right English Defence League. Conjecturing about causes of, or motivations behind, urban change was also widespread across the three cases. When, in July 2019, a fire swept through Walthamstow Mall, live tweeting and sharing included myriad suspicions and conspiracy theories. One user feigned inside knowledge: “New flats coming;” another speculated they “Wouldn’t be surprised if it was an inside job by the council;” while another said, “I bet the developers are rubbing their hands in glee.” To be sure, others expressed doubts about such allegations, particularly the notion that a London Council would engage in arson: one user, referring to a television soap opera, said such a scenario would be “classic EastEnders.” But the local ‘Save Our Square’ campaign thought the event serious enough to announce an emergency meeting just three days after the fire.

Across these cases, social media embodies a platform infrastructure supporting novel and also unequal kinds of urban political ‘participation.’ It perhaps goes without saying that this participation excludes users off the platforms in question. But there are also differentiations at play here in the localized situations, moments, and routines through which such translocal, standardized communication environments come into play—and also different valuations of that participation. For local politicians, bureaucrats, and activists, social media were sometimes valued as a means of mobilising, monitoring, and convening publics and their concerns. But, social media were also seen as unruly because they challenge more formal kinds of status or authority, and also in that they were often seen as hotbeds of divisive, antagonistic, so-called ‘post-truth’ politics; digitally mediated ‘echo chambers;’ or ‘filter bubbles’ for like-minded people to cloister. Perhaps, most notably, however, social media

platforms, which present content through various time-encoded, streaming interfaces, seemed to afford a new pace for a politics of the city, one that is experienced as real-time-like.³⁷

Conclusion

In this short essay I have sought to bring forth some examples from London and appeal for a broadly phenomenological perspective highlighting the duality of platforms as infrastructures for urban politics. This has entailed approaching platforms principally as experienced infrastructures, considering both how platforms emerge as objects of urban politics, as well as how communicative platforms such as social media are environments in which urban phenomena show up as possible objects of political concern or action. These are qualities which can and very often do work in tandem. For example, Uber's contestation by many of its London drivers was partly coordinated through Facebook groups such as UK - UBER DRIVERS (30k members) and Uber Drivers London Official (8.6k members). The King's Cross development has been complemented by an extensive campaign that branded the area 'KX,' and endeavoured to stimulate online conversations using hashtags such as #MeetMeKX.³⁸

The experiential approach I have outlined here may, on the surface, seem to have less of a critical edge, compared with the socio-political framings of infrastructure mentioned earlier. As discussed in co-authored work,³⁹ however, I would prefer to label this approach as 'post-critical'.⁴⁰ It is not an apolitical orientation, but rather one that does not begin with a default stance of suspicion. Instead, it temporarily suspends judgment to understand political experience. The global pandemic has further drawn attention to increasingly local dependencies on platforms. The experience of the past year (and indeed recent years) has rightly prompted the posing of more critical questions about the power of platforms within urban life. These critical questions need to include challenging platform power. But, they also

need to include ways of thinking about urban politics with, through, and alongside platforms, and the most appropriate public responses for better navigating such future conditions.

Endnotes

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3. cf. Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

4. cf. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

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23. Ibid., 98.
24. Ibid., 98.
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