

# Platform Research

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Platform research is a style of engaged research. If engaged research aims to make a positive difference to the world through collaboration with others, platform research provides a conceptual and technical model that allows such engagement to happen. In current use a platform is an object, system or process that is built upon to practical effect. A platform provides the basis for practice of some kind. In political terms, a platform is the name given to a declaration of principles. In the computing world, its most common definition is as an operating system or an application that connects users. Platform research combines a practical orientation to interpretative inquiry and concept production with digital methods of organisation and orchestration. It is at once an analytical technique and a means of coordinating researchers from different disciplines and locations around collectively designed empirical investigations. Platforms bring bodies and brains into relation.

Platforms are neither good nor bad. They are in wide use across corporate settings, commercial media and even military applications. They also have an activist heritage and have been widely deployed in art projects and interventions. Platforms are what you make of them. They provide the conditions of possibility for practice to occur, regardless of the political or ethical orientation of that practice. When such practice is research, the capacity for platforms to create an expanding commons of participation is crucial. By providing a context (digital or otherwise) where researchers and those usually identified as research subjects or research users can interact and coproduce, platforms question the traditional methodological and disciplinary boundaries of research. Platforms allow projects to make their own publics. They generate forms of participation that open paths of circulation and reception. In turn, this creates new participation. The process continues until the project stops, dissipates or mutates into another.

This circularity involves something more than the reflexivity of the ethnographic researcher who positions herself with respect to an informant. Platform research is a

collective effort. It supports neither the lone ethnographer who does fieldwork nor the individual theorist who remains sequestered behind the screen. At the same time, platform research backs away from an easy ethos of collaboration, where different parties or stakeholders bring different priorities and methods to the table in a seemingly seamless way. Platforms generate struggle as the precondition for relation. Platforms open a space for methodological experimentation. They differ from usual efforts of mixed method research, which assume the smooth integration of diverse approaches and perspectives. Platforms provide the opportunity for different researchers or groups of researchers to conduct related investigations that deploy different methods and styles. Platforms are thus interested in the performativity of method, or the ways in which methods produce their objects. They seek not to integrate diverse approaches but to probe the gaps or frictions between different methods. In this way, platforms generate knowledge within the space opened by epistemological rifts and distinctions.

To create and probe these discontinuities in knowledge, platforms seek a horizontal expansion of participation that continuously brings new perspectives and subjects on board. Yet they are not naïve about the power relations implicit in such expansion. Platforms are not open slather. Nor are they like the closed gardens of social media. It looks like anyone can enter but not everyone does. Often a core group of organisers is responsible for encouraging, sifting and selecting the contributions. When platforms take a digital form—for instance, through the creation and upkeep of a central website—this curatorial function usually overlaps with a measured control of the digital space. Moderation gives the platform shape. This is not a democratic process. Not everyone holds the passwords. Somebody is always browned off. And rightly so, since contributing to a platform often entails free labour.

A degree of vertical organisation facilitates and underlies the horizontal participation that defines and sustains the platform. Indeed, the secret truth of platforms is that often there is no ready public eager to contribute the process. Participation has to be drummed up or engineered. Nonetheless, the result

is an expanding plurality of perspectives, methods, receptions and engagements that produce a dynamic archive of research materials. Sometimes these catalogues of collective inquiry resonate beyond the specific object and practice of research, intersecting with what often appear as seemingly incommensurate worlds such as policymaking. In such instances, the contours of platforms are expansive, but not in ways that can be predetermined. In this regard, contingency is the unforeseen catalyst of transformation. Platforms are receptive to such intervention from the outside. They do not assume a black box of total control. Platforms, therefore, are also insecure undertakings.

Platforms are devices for knowledge translation. As they move across different spaces and institutional worlds, they address different audiences and expectations. Every experienced researcher knows that you don't address a theorist as you talk to a policymaker, or that you can't approach a Deputy Vice Chancellor as if she were an activist. Straddling these discursive realms is an inherently risky business. One way that platforms cope with this plurality of address is by proliferating genres. Their outputs are multiple and diverse, ranging across different media of expression from the website to the peer reviewed article, the computer game to the pamphlet, the mailing list discussion to the grant application. In performing these translations, platforms refuse to flatten them toward a single bourne. Their address is always multiple and heterogeneous. The receiving authority of academic debate and assessment is only one trajectory, and perhaps not the most important one. This is how platforms hold themselves to account. In addressing academic peers or policymakers, they test what they say against what would be acceptable within the edgier political scenes through which they move. Platform researchers are not opportunists who say different things to different people.

Platforms can move across geographical space. They are particularly suited to multi-sited projects that interest themselves in the study of globally distributed phenomena. In allowing a multiplication of perspectives and methods, platforms facilitate research that is sensitive to the relations within and between locations. They are not beholden to the

national and for them the global exists only as a constellation of situations. Platforms seed or encourage mutual participation across sites, creating opportunities for cross-hatching and insight not possible within a format that promotes parallel studies in different sites. In this regard, the platform approach is not to be mistaken as a form of comparative research. Often a challenge for platform research is to decide about the sites in which to conduct research. Particularly when there is interest in globally distributed phenomena, almost any site can be turned into a source of rich knowledge about these phenomena. The choice of sites is thus often arbitrary, resting more on established or potential possibilities for collaboration than a strong interest in the locality itself. However, this is not always the case. Platform research is spatially adaptable. It can anchor itself in a single site or follow a particular research theme or interest across sites, adding them as participants come on board, often in unbalanced and uneven ways. However the research sites are chosen, for the practical purposes of submitting grant applications a narrative will need to be devised that stitches sites together in coherent and compelling ways.

Max Weber once wrote: 'It is not the "actual" interconnection of "things" but the conceptual interconnection of problems that define the scope of the various sciences'. Platform research is wary of becoming an empirical goose chase. As much as it may interest itself in the interconnection of things, there is no expectation that finding and tracing such links will reveal the truth. This is not only because connections are not necessarily lived relations. It is also because empirical work need not issue in the production of concepts, leading solely to descriptive analysis. Platform research is productive of concepts. But it is not an excuse to indulge in philosophising. Concepts arise from empirical engagement. As conceptual artist Robert Smithson once wrote: 'The investigation of a specific site is a matter of extracting concepts'. The same applies to multi-sited studies. Concept production and theory work proceed from field investigation rather than emerging as second order exercises addressed solely to academic peers and divorced from the realities and tensions of working with diverse socialities across different sites.

Whatever happened to fieldwork? Once the professional obligation of anthropologists committed to thick description and lived reflexivity, fieldwork was a platform for ethnographic practice. Then ethnography exploded. It was everywhere and in every discipline, at least in the human sciences. Some years later, it migrated to the corporate sector with Sony releasing anthropologists as 'cool hunters' and Intel busily in search of the latest adaptations of digital technology outside of the lab. Reduced to the focus group or the unstructured qualitative interview, ethnography was at once belittled and aggrandised as a privileged, even necessary, step in the empirical crafting of knowledge. Anthropologists may lament the degradation of their art. But platform research does not participate in this melancholy. Rather, it is committed to knowledge production that recognises and works within material and institutional constraints that enable research practice to extend across disciplinary and epistemological boundaries.

Perhaps a few privileged researchers still have the time and resources for old style fieldwork. For most in the accelerated academy, juggling time and metrics, the possibility to spend a year in the field is a hopeless dream or a distant memory. Paradoxically, or at least seemingly so, this situation has emerged just as the world has become more globalised and opportunities for mobility have multiplied. The researcher has become a time-pressured cosmopolitan. Fieldwork has become a fly in-fly out experience and, in this, is structurally indistinguishable from a range of cognate modes of work, most obviously in the mining sector. How is it possible to conduct responsible research when you are gone the next day? Platform research offers some pointers. By collectivising the research process and recruiting local knowledge at its sites of investigation, the possibilities for sustained engagement and discovery are heightened. Returning to sites, combing methods and collecting data from different sources is also crucial. There is no substitute for face-to-face meetings, but such collaboration also entails the maintenance of research relationships across time and space. And here digital technology is vital.

Platform research is digital research that moves between online and offline worlds.

Unlike projects that use websites or social media purely for purposes of dissemination and publicity, platform research is digital in its mode of organisation. The digital architecture of platforms not only facilitates an expansion of participation but also provides the basis for collaboration between researchers located in and moving across different sites. Both hardware and software bear upon how platforms function and assemble methods, above and beyond the stale combination of qualitative interviews and critical discourse analysis. The experience of organising or participating in platform research is one of continuous adjustment as relations generated through digital communications (including the expressive use of websites, blogs, mailing lists, social media, or mapping and visualisation tools) rub against and even possibly shape contingencies generated by the sociality of encounter in the field.

As much as platforms may deploy methods of digital modelling, simulation or data analytics, this interaction with the offline world keeps the research anchored and alive. One might call this the post-digital instantiation of research in which the digital has a defining power but in such a way that its presence has become a background force, so integrated is the digital within labour and life, society and economy. In this respect, platform research differs from research that simply moves analogue methods (surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, user ethnographies, etc.) online. The continuous calibration of digital methods to offline realities also distinguishes it from so-called 'natively digital' investigations, which, in scouring the web or other digital archives for patterns and correlations, risk revealing more about the parameters coded or entered into analytics software than the material conditions in which issues, actors and discourses are embedded.

Platforms are not only technical architectures but also institutional forms. Insofar as they involve editorial or curatorial oversight, they share some of the centralising features and vertical organisation of power typical of modern cultural institutions such as museums or libraries. But it would be a mistake to see platforms as equivalents to such modern institutions. This would be to underestimate their capacity to encourage experimentation and generate new institutional forms.

Everywhere modern institutions confront the difficulties presented by digital media and information society by integrating their processes into their structures. Newspapers set up blogs, universities establish living labs, museums put collections online, and parliamentarians tweet. The logic of platforms is otherwise, since they are initiated within digital media but face the challenges of governance and sustainability associated with online environments prone to weak social ties, uncertain funding and ephemeral relations between participants.

Platforms tend to work with fixed protocols that scaffold participation but also scatter users across time and space. They provide a halfway house between modern institutional forms and distributed networks. Their logic is neither that of the state nor the swarm. Rather, they offer a new kind of institutional form-in-the-making. Due to this emergent condition they are often obliged to establish themselves on the edges of existing institutions to access funding paths or other resources. Often subjects embedded in these institutions are willing to divert resources to the platform. For these subjects being part of the platform is a vital source of intellectual engagement, which remains unsatisfied within official institutional structures saturated with audit routines, performance curves and the overproduction of policy.

Platform researchers never flaunt their institutional affiliations. They do not give power point presentations with logos inserted into the corner of each slide. Template thought is anathema to the collective work of concept production and the testing of method devised with an eye to the specificities of the digital. Platform research continually moves between incongruent worlds, downplaying its reliance on existing institutional structures and displaying a capacity to invent and experiment with new ones. This is not just a matter of some kind of juvenile false consciousness that wishes to disavow the hand that feeds. Rather, it is recognition that a single institutional emblem is hostile in a subtractive manner to collective research that neither bears identity nor coddles itself in the romance of community.

Platforms do not offer solutions. Platforms produce questions. Platforms are machines for making knowledge. Platforms are given to temporariness. Platforms have an uncertain future. Perhaps platforms are just a transitional arrangement. Platforms probably will emerge as officially recognised institutional forms. At that point platforms will attract taxes, audits, policies and final reports. Platforms will lose their edginess. At that point we will have to abandon platforms. And then we will have to invent something else.

\* Thanks to Paul James and Ned Rossiter for some phrasings.