

Markets and Power in the Digital Age

International conference organized by the Economic Sociology research committee of the Swiss Sociological Association

September 16-17, 2021 University of Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, Switzerland

The rise and spread of digital technologies over the past few decades has led to reconfigurations of many facets of the global economy and brought about new forms of power and power relations in both local and transnational markets. The transformations have been described as a new stage of capitalist development – platform capitalism (Srniczek 2017) – and scholars have studied the new forms of control that digital technology produces within markets, for instance, through new forms of surveillance and algorithmic governance (e.g. Zuboff 2018) and through the self-disciplining effects of credit ratings (e.g. Fourcade and Healy 2016).

In this international conference, we propose to look at the issue of power within the global digital economy. The question of power deserves renewed attention with regard to the digital transformations of the economy at large, and platform capitalism in particular. Power relations infuse market relations and processes of coordination, valuation, and exchange in markets. Recent developments in the digital economy, in particular, the rise of global technology platforms reorganizing markets, have rendered the power dimension of markets more explicit. In the platform economy, competition is greatly affected by the affordances of digital capital. Winners are those hoarding data and preventing interoperability, while content creators, gig workers, and users are increasingly dependent of digital infrastructures they have no (or very little) control of. Platforms govern through “algorithmic power” and data extraction and pose challenges to workers’ rights, existing institutions of the welfare state as well as to social mobility.

Increasingly, the power of a few globally dominant players in the platform economy has come under scrutiny and calls for regulation have ensued. However, the questions of how and along what normative principles such rapidly changing platforms may be regulated is subject to ongoing debate. These issues became all the more relevant in the context of the current pandemic. The pandemic has accelerated the digital transformation of the economy by favoring digital forms of consumption and teleworking. Further, the management of the pandemic has been strongly intertwined with digital technologies – such as contact tracing apps, and the unprecedented use of data analytics in devising political responses – pushing questions of power and governance through digital technology into the center of public debate.

The conference aims to investigate the workings of power in digital markets, and the forms of resistance and struggles that the new platform economy provokes, inviting contributions from different social science perspectives. We want to focus in particular, although not exclusively, on four dimensions that are at the core of the issue of power in digital markets.

(1) Regulation, market structures and the state

We invite papers that look in particular at issues of regulation of the economy in the age of platform capitalism, including the question of institutional arrangements, standards, rules and conventions in digital markets, the issue of monopolies and value extraction, the question of taxation in the transnational platform economy, as well as more broader question related to shifting power dynamics between states and platforms through the affordances of the digital economy.

(2) Algorithmic governance, digital infrastructures and market architectures

This strand invites papers that examine the effects of the digital transformation on market structures, on the relations between content creators, workers, and users, and their relations to employers, as well as the room it leaves for resistance and contention of algorithmic power within markets and organizations. It also welcomes insights into how such algorithmic systems and infrastructures are designed, deployed, and maintained and how these processes foster new power dynamics.

(3) Social stratification

We welcome papers looking at how digital platforms and technologies shape inequality and social stratification. In this context, power refers to the shifting power dynamics within society, but also to the power of digital platforms and new forms of governance facilitated by them – for example, the neoliberal self-governance prompted by household credit ratings.

(4) Data and new forms of economic exchanges

In the platform economy, more and more services – such as social networks, job search services but also financial services – are offered for “free”, in exchange for users’ data, to be later capitalized by data-brokers. This has sparked debates on the changing nature of the economy, seemingly moving from market exchange towards a gift/barter economy. This strand welcomes papers that look at power in the context of these shifting forms of exchange.

To address these themes, we welcome contributions both from economic and digital sociology as well as from related fields and disciplines.

Please send abstract proposals of a maximum of 500 words **by February 28** to philip.balsiger@unine.ch and michael.nollert@unifr.ch

Conference organizers: Philip Balsiger, University of Neuchâtel, and Michael Nollert, University of Fribourg

Scientific committee: Paula Bialski, University of St Gallen; Luca Perrig, University of Geneva; Léna Pellandini-Simányi, Università della Svizzera italiana (Lugano)