







CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Julian Sefton-Green , *Sonia Livingstone* ,
Kate Mannell , and *Ola Erstad* 

Abstract This brief introductory chapter establishes the context for the argument of this book. In a context of increasing platformization and simultaneously reshaping of the contemporary family, how do platforms and families see, understand, and interact with each other as changing kinds of processes and social institutions? The chapter outlines the contents of the rest of the book.

Keywords Family • Platforms • Digitalisation • Datafication

J. Sefton-Green (✉) • K. Mannell
ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, Deakin University,
Melbourne, Australia
e-mail: julian.seftongreen@deakin.edu.au

S. Livingstone
Department of Media and Communications, The London School of Economics
and Political Science, London, UK

O. Erstad
Department of Education, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

INTRODUCTION

In just two decades, digital platforms have come to define our age—we even talk of ‘the platform society.’ What are the consequences for our everyday lives? For families? This book shows how, for families, technological innovation can seem appealing, even compelling, in curious ways supportive of people’s agency, energy and creativity, notwithstanding the popularity of dystopian narratives about the take-over of the machine. But that’s not the whole story and for both families and critical scholars, platforms also represent the latest in the long march of capitalist inventions concentrating power ever more tightly in the hands of the unaccountable few. The early excitement about the free flow of information and communication across decentralised global networks now seems long gone. As Anne Helmond (2015, p. 8) has said of “the double logic of platformization,” platforms are embedding themselves in all aspects of our public and private lives at work and home, learning and leisure, health and wellbeing, commerce and civic participation, local and global, even crime, while simultaneously drawing everything back to themselves.

Fuelled by the digitalisation, datafication, and commodification of people’s agency, energy, and creativity, platforms represent an extraordinary recentralisation of power in the hands of today’s most profitable companies, with limited control by governments. Yet our particular interest in this book is not so much how platforms operate in terms of governance or their political economy: rather, we ask how they *platformize* the family. Through this ugly word that emphasises *process*, we examine how the use of platforms might structure, mediate, influence, accommodate, or recontextualise everyday life, potentially changing family life as it is lived. What is the significance of characterising family life as being ‘platformed’? What does this mean in practice, as platforms become actively embedded in ever more private domains within different kinds of homes and households? What do these large-scale social-economic-technological infrastructures portend for the role and nature of the family as a social unit and in its everyday life? And what research methods can capture these deep and often opaque processes?

These kinds of questions can only be answered by knowing more about how families actually use platforms and, at the same time, how platforms—meaning the companies that own them and their particular techno-social designs and functions—offer families particular services, and afford them distinct opportunities and risks. To answer these questions, we need to

weave together research from several domains that have developed somewhat in parallel—including platform studies and the sociology of the family. Since media and communication studies have variously interacted with both domains, we use this as the mediating space of discussion and explanation in answering some questions—and asking others—about the implications of digital platforms for the everyday life of the family.

The impacts of platformization are likely to be far-reaching. Technically, the digital platform is defined by its modular programmable architecture that allows third-party developers to build applications (apps) through its API (Application Programming Interface). Economically, platforms operate a two-sided (or multi-sided) market—serving two or more user groups simultaneously via the platform, such as end-users and advertisers (Helmond, 2015). In principle, each side benefits from network effects and each provides network benefits for the other. However, given the very different and unequal forms of power on each side—the users constitute a mass market, while companies hold the power to make decisions and reap profit—there are growing concerns over the potential for platforms to exploit their users. At present, the consequences of families’ increasing dependence on both state-managed and commercial platforms are unclear to the social scientists now beginning to ask questions. As Gillespie (2017) observed, “in its connotations, a platform offers the opportunity to act, connect, or speak in ways that are powerful and effective,” yet this metaphor obscures how those opportunities are shaped and controlled by the platform. In short, digital platforms connect but also exclude, and they offer opportunities to communicate and act ‘for free’ only on their own heavily transactional terms and at an unprecedented cost to our privacy and autonomy.

Chapter 2 sets out our theoretical line of enquiry. Sonia Livingstone and Julian Sefton-Green begin by detailing the broad context of digital transformations focusing on the changing role of digital platforms across many domains in contemporary life. Platforms are now a key type of societal infrastructure governing many social, institutional, and interpersonal interactions. Similarly, and in parallel, they introduce literature describing how platforms are increasingly understood in relationship to families. This is both in terms of the family as a social unit and how the family conducts its interior and exterior lives through or ‘on’ platforms. They describe the theories and concepts that have been used to explain how families use platforms to ‘compose’ themselves and how families are addressed and identified as a social unit through and by digital platforms. They also raise

questions about what it means to research this intersection of platforms and families and what methodological challenges such enquiry makes—challenges taken up in Chapter 5. Contemporary ideas of the family itself are of course in a change of flux and the chapter goes on to describe how the sociology of the family is reconceptualising what the family might mean in the context of radical social restructuring and individualisation. The chapter ends by trying to conceptualise the relationship between families and platforms and how this relationship may be better understood by researching the *activities of platformization*.

Chapter 3 focuses on how platformization occurs in relation to the home and its varied meanings in family life. In this chapter, Kate Mannell, Kristinn Hegna, and Mariya Stoilova begin by describing the mobile and networked media environment in which platformization is occurring, highlighting recurring themes around negotiations between privacy and autonomy, public and private spaces, and the uses and meanings of the homes. Drawing on examples from recent research in the UK and Norway, they then map two key trajectories along which the platformization of family life relates to the home: first, how platform technologies are bound up in the extension of familial care *beyond* the home, and secondly, how platform technologies are involved in the reshaping of domestic practices *within* the home. The chapter argues for the need to consider relationships between the household and the home and to make explicit dimensions of place, privacy, shared living, and the sites of media engagement when researching families, homes, and platformization.

In Chapter 4, Luci Pangrazio, Katrin Langton, and Andra Siibak explore a more specific context for digital media use and engagement in family life by focusing on how cultures of parenting play out in relation to platforms. Using a key case study into mobile apps for tracking and facilitating infant feeding and care, the chapter investigates how understandings of what it is to be a ‘good’ parent are increasingly defined through datafication and explicit metrics. It opens with a brief overview of the relationship between digital platforms, datafication, and the various contexts and micro-contexts for digital parenting. It then presents two forms of data: an app walkthrough of two infant feeding apps, and interviews with parents about their baby-tracking practices. The findings highlight instances of technology design and parental practice that challenge socio-technical imaginaries of the usefulness of data, resist datafying practices, or allow parents to appropriate datafication for their own ends. They also emphasise how processes of platformization are not solely determined by

platform operators as institutional practices, cultural trends, and parents' lived experience are all contributing factors. The chapter concludes by summarising how platformization might be re-mediating the ways in which families understand themselves as individuals, social units, and institutions, as well as highlighting areas for future research.

In Chapter 5, Antonio Membrive and Raquel Miño-Puigcercós address the challenge of designing methods and methodologies to research the theories of the changing digital family. As noted above, the difficulty of combining broad social theory with detailed study of social and interpersonal interactions requires different kinds of investigations and more varied research approaches than are common. In particular, accounts of platforming the family need to move away from simplistic definitions like 'screen time' toward rigorous and imaginative methods for capturing everyday family life. The chapter identifies some of the methodological challenges recognised by researchers who have conducted empirical work on family lives and platformization and suggests methodological approaches and strategies that can be useful to address these challenges. It explores established and innovative methodologies that have been, or could be, used to understand how interactions among families are mediated by digital platforms and illustrates them with empirical cases. The chapter discusses the potentials and limitations of methods such as digital family ethnographies, interviews with digital prompts, and participatory methods, to elaborate questions and suggestions for researchers entering the field.

The final chapter of the book brings together key ideas, theories, methodological issues, and questions raised across the book to propose an agenda for progressing research on the platformization of the family. It summarises the key dimensions of platforms and families and proposes a theory of extended-domestication that bridges the micro and macro elements of these dimensions.

REFERENCES

- Gillespie, T. (2017, August 24). *The platform metaphor, revisited*. Digital Society Blog. <https://www.hiig.de/en/the-platform-metaphor-revisited/>
- Helmond, A. (2015). The Platformization of the web: Making web data platform ready. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 2056305115603080. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

