

Are Tech Platforms Taking Over Family Life?



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Think of your phone – how many apps could you delete today, which do you rely on, and why? What happens if you lose your phone?

Our everyday reliance on platforms is barely more than a decade old. A long time in tech terms, but not in the evolution of the family. Already, we are talking of the platform society, of tech platforms as an infrastructure to our lives – meaning, they are ubiquitous, we rely on them every day, take them for granted, and only notice them when they break down. We have our loyalties to some, our frustrations with others, and we explore their functionality with interest, sometimes creatively, maybe gaming them to make them work for us.

We know that tech platforms are making sizeable profits. But are the changes that they bring working well for families? Meaningful relations matter to families but may not fit the business strategies or segmented markets of the platforms; are families finding a workaround or even trying to resist? In-person interaction matters to families, but is this undermined by the glowing small screen? Families think of their private life as private; does it matter to them that it's not? Is society's reliance on platforms contributing to declining trust – in institutions, businesses, even in each other?

Platforms are big business

Platforms are big businesses – to be precise, two-sided or multi-sided markets. We, the users, are one side of the market – and they underpin our communication – think of WhatsApp, our Saturday nights (Netflix), our soundscape (Spotify), our social network (Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat). They also underpin much more – banking, health, work, education, news, shopping and travel.

How have tech platforms become among the most profitable companies in the world? That's where the other side of the market comes in. Research shows how¹ platforms track our activities, collect our personal information, profile our tastes and preferences, monetise our attention in the global data ecosystem and sort us according to our likely value to others, whether government

1 Erstad et al. (2024). How digital technologies become embedded in family life across generations: scoping the agenda for researching 'platformised relationality'.

or businesses, in increasingly automated and opaque ways. Yet they are not accountable to us, but to their shareholders. Our interests do not drive their business model unless it's profitable, or the government makes them.

Not only are platforms the new infrastructure for society, but they are profoundly individualistic – my phone, my Spotify playlist, my learning zone. No longer can we lend a book or magazine or borrow a game or DVD. For the platforms, the user is singular, and shared devices or passwords mess up the digital profiles they construct and monetise. For the platforms, families are also normative – they assume we cohabit in a traditional household, with parents in agreement over the purse strings and children doing as they are told.

Yet, people are social. Our relationships define us. Our mutual responsibilities connect us. Our imaginaries are jointly constructed. So, platforms are used in shared ways, including in families – a child receives her homework on Google Classroom, and her mum calls it 'our homework'. A grandfather needs help from his daughter to book a doctor's appointment on the app. People keep an eye on each other using Snap maps or Life 360. They coordinate what's for supper on WhatsApp.

And it's not all happy families. Conflict can centre on how much time on TikTok, or photos that reveal you were not where you said you'd be, or unexpected bills from a computer game. People are also diverse, and for some it may seem easier if everyone has their own account, to suit their own preferences, to enjoy with headphones on. Nor do families fit into the neat platform vision of them – in reality, they

spread across households and geographies, they have secrets that data tracking should not undermine, they may include a family friend but not the in-laws. Does Alexa understand this? Should it?

Of course, the very idea of 'the family' is plural, fluid, intersectional, situated; how does that square with global platforms that valorise standardised, efficient transactions over human values, flexible meaning-making, co-constructed practices and the messy realities of everyday life? Is this a preoccupation for families, or does it go unnoticed? Are people reflexive or complicit? Are their responses generational? Or classed? How are kinship practices being made and remade in the platform society?

The platformization of the family

A recent book of this title, published by researchers from the PlatFAMs project and Digital Child centre, proposes that families, defined as openly as possible, are being 'platformized' – meaning reshaped by platforms in ways yet to be well understood. This isn't to point to a monolithic or totalising process, but one in which families are complexly engaged in multiple ways that are also not well understood. Noticing the shifts in family life due to platformization is tricky because they happen gradually, the result of countless small decisions, often made in the moment to solve a specific problem or to meet an immediate need. A doorbell breaks and is replaced by one with a camera monitored via an app, or a parent wants to know when to put dinner on and realises he can use Find My iPhone to check his daughter's ETA, or a whole-family WhatsApp group is

created in the run-up to Christmas and never gets disbanded.

For teens trying to carve their own path, something as seemingly innocuous and potentially useful as a read receipt can be a source of stress or conflict if it transforms the expectation on them to engage with wider family – extending the occasional visit, phone call or postcard into a continuous obligation to like, reply and share the daily flow of messages.

Children are not the only ones who may feel family group messages as a burden. Adult siblings may resent having to engage with self-congratulatory news and photos from their brothers or sisters or interpret their parents' effusive reaction as a subtle preference ranking or even veiled criticism. In-laws may find being pulled tightly into their relative's partner's family dynamics overwhelming. Grandparents may find it baffling that no one likes phone calls anymore, and their grandchildren live life on the small screen. Meanwhile, people who play an important role in a child's life may feel hurt when membership of a chat is drawn based on normative assumptions of who is and isn't family.

Should society intervene in the platformization of family life?

In the UK, Ofcom's regulatory codes do not require companies to design for rights, agency or wellbeing, and companies have wide discretion on product design. This discretion is most often exercised to advance commercial interests. As a result, a feature or functionality that causes a family difficulties may not be one that they can turn off or dial down – for example, WhatsApp allows users to turn off

read receipts when messaging one-to-one but not in group chats.

It is the role of policymakers and regulators to set and enforce minimum safety and privacy standards across all platforms. Irrespective of whether they are accessed by children at home, at school or when they are out and about, digital products must be age appropriate and rights-respecting by design and by default. Despite the passage of the Online Safety Act, we are a long way from this being a norm. We are even further from families being able to set parameters on platformization, including the ability to choose which aspects of a product or service they want to use and how, or which they find stressful, compulsive or burdensome in other ways.

Greater awareness of platformization is likely to lead families to question the terms on which products and services are offered and to demand greater choice and control. If these calls are ignored by tech companies, challenger brands may step in to offer more compassionate and rights-respecting alternatives or policymakers may intervene. Consulting families when diversifying market options would be a good first step.

The ways in which the digital platforms mediate so many aspects of our commercial and personal life – and how this has begun to transform everyday family existence is explored in depth within the new book [The Platformization of the Family](#).

A version of this article was previously published in the [Media@LSE Blog](#).