

# International news flows through the lens of platformization

## Introduction

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In this special issue, we hope to deepen and broaden reflections on international news flows and how *corporate digital platforms* - with their escalating influence over all aspects of social life - contribute to or mitigate against *global news diversity*: topics which, despite so clearly intersecting, are rarely considered together. Our world is mediated through an increasingly complex news ecosystem where platform-based algorithms are central for large public visibility to (international) news (Bucher, 2018). This issue has some continuity with one published almost a decade ago in this journal. Without being exclusively focused on online news flows, the issue *Sources and Flows of news* (2012) had already pointed out the growing role played by digital intermediaries. It is striking to notice that at the time, both organizations (firms) and individuals were considered as intermediaries. Of course, aggregators such as Google News - launched in the early 2000s - were already well established, and some researchers were interested in the role of bloggers not only as information relays but as producers. Similarly, social networking sites were seen as tools at the service of their users to spread information, as well as disseminators of news produced by media companies.

Since then, one may have the feeling that media companies are the ones who have progressively put themselves at the service of digital social networks,

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relegating Internet users to passive consumers. Such a trend within social networks parallels the path of search engines, and supports the hypothesis of an infrastructural media capture (Nechushtai, 2018). Over time, the relationship between news producers and digital intermediaries has been increasingly integrated in the form of *platformization* (Smyrnaio, Rebillard, 2019), where the news industry became the synergistic content providers of platforms. The digital platforms are owned by transnational firms whose size and concentration has greatly expanded (with Alphabet including Google and YouTube, Meta including Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp). The geopolitical stakes for the circulation of news on a global scale keep evolving, as competitors widen their zone of influence (including via TikTok and the Chinese company ByteDance).

Decades of communication research on the inequalities and imbalances within international news flows demonstrated asymmetry between the Global North and the Global South - with a strong focus on international news agencies and global media networks (Mattelart, 2014; Schiller, 1976). This scholarship requires updating for the digital age, since journalism and media have been transformed by platforms. Long a focus of news flow research, news agencies serve as ‘news intermediary organizations’ (Rantanen and Kelly, 2020: 1897) and play a decisive role in the communication of world affairs (Rantanen, 2021; Surm, 2020). As gatekeepers, they influence and set the global news agenda (Thussu, 2000: 130; Jukes, 2022: 5), and provide information from distant events that media organizations cannot cover themselves, given the cost of international reporting (Jukes, 2022: 2; López del Castillo Wilderbeek, 2023: 919). The position that agencies once occupied as agents of imperialism has not entirely faded, with Xinhua often seen leading China’s efforts to influence media globally (Madrid-Morales, 2021). Notwithstanding their significance as global players in the international news ecosystem (Sánchez Marín, 2017: 158), news agencies, most notably their practices (Paterson, 2012: 1), continue to be under-researched compared to other types of media (Rantanen, 2021: 264). Similarly, since the last large study of the global news flow two decades ago (Wu, 2000), research into the flow of news from origin to distribution across channels and geographies is rare (exceptions include Watanabe, 2017).

Like news agencies, digital platforms have also partly become information transnationals. Unlike the former which are upstream in the news chain, they are downstream. They thus benefit from direct contact with Internet users - often, instead of the news media. Hence, issues of freedom of expression and pluralism, so important to democratic societies, concern digital platforms. Regulations in this area should be

applied to them, as it is to news media. This is a process in which states are lagging. To use the metaphor of a former member of the French media regulatory authority (CSA), who is also a researcher in network economics (Curien, 2021), for several years, television channels continued to be regulated like fish in a bowl, even though the bowl was immersed in an ocean of information in which Internet users were swimming.

Gradually, the legislative and regulatory framework is evolving and adapting to information transiting through platforms as much as through the legacy media. However, there is another challenge, this time concerning the international scope of the tech giants. The national framework is no longer sufficient, and it is necessary to move to a supranational stage. The European Union is a pioneer in this area. Its European Media Freedom Act project is a novelty insofar as media freedom issues are not usually dealt with at the European level. However, putting it into practice is proving difficult since it has to deal with countries that (to put it in a caricatured way) are interventionist in the South of Europe, and prefer free exchange in the North of Europe, which thus leads to the elaboration of a “meta-regulation” whose implementation remains to be seen (Cantro Gamito, 2023). One might suspect the neo-liberal perspective will continue to dominate, since it has largely inspired international digital regulation until now, based in particular on the libertarian vision of self-regulation that nourished the original ideals of the Internet (Bietti, 2023).

The relationship between news and users is evolving dynamically, partially configured by the technological affordances designed by platforms. For almost two decades, mobile phones have now been associated with social media usage to distribute content, including news. However, if a few platforms dominate news flows, what are the consequences for global journalism, and global news diversity especially? Despite abundant digital news, the lack of original and consistent journalism remains problematic for pluralism in the digital environment (Paterson, 2007; Rebillard and Loicq, 2013). Lowering economic entrance barriers to the status of news producers does not necessarily mean a larger plurality of equally visible sources. It could also contribute to a homogenization of news due to intertwined economic and political logics of control. If news production is more decentralized and open to more voices, the gatekeeping process is still the key to visibility, mainly controlled by platforms in the digital realm. How does this control affect global news flow in the digital environment and contribute (or not) to homogenizing the meaning of social life and events?

While news consumption via traditional channels (print, radio and television) has decreased on an inter-

national scale over the past decade, online consumption only grew marginally (Newman et al., 2022). This suggests a growing disconnection from the news (5% in 2022), coinciding with a general decline of interest in journalism. Overall, Facebook is the most popular network for reading online news, though its usage has decreased by 12% since 2016. Social news consumption varies by region, with Latin America and Africa having higher usage than the Western world, and the platforms used also differ. Although Facebook is used by 59% in Africa, WhatsApp (55%) and Telegram (18%) are similarly popular. In Latin America, all major social networks are equally important, compared to Asia, where platform use is highly country-dependent. Beyond the prominent position of the GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft), understanding contemporary international news flows require consideration of the emergence of competing actors from other geographic areas. Thus, the development of BATX (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Xiaomi), as well as the rapid global growth of Chinese social network TikTok suggest a change in power relations. While TikTok is still most popular for young people under 25 (reaching 40% and being used by 15% for news consumption), usage across all age groups has steadily increased.

In the countries of the South, the role of Google and Facebook as web services or applications is complemented by the importance of messaging apps such as WhatsApp (also owned by Facebook) or Telegram. Although it does not favor the production of original journalism, WhatsApp is a key piece of the Brazilian media ecosystem as it interacts with the flows of other platforms and traditional media (Piaia & Alves, 2020). WhatsApp and Telegram took a strategic role in the orchestration of disinformation campaigns during the Brazilian elections of 2018 and 2022, which accentuated political polarization (Chagas, 2022; Moreira Cesar & Santos, 2020; Baptista et al, 2019), and their role in spreading disinformation across Africa is considerable (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2022). Recently, the Covid-19 pandemic found fertile ground to disseminate conspiracy theories and “reinformation” initiatives in the digital environment. Faced with these problems, Brazilian legislation has been especially concerned with a “social regulation” of the internet, making economic regulation secondary (Ruediguer, 2022).

The cooperation between news organizations and (very large digital) platforms is multi-sided. It includes funding initiatives regarding innovation (Ouakrat, 2020; Papaevangelou & Smyrniotis, 2022; Papaevangelou, 2023), as well as collaboration with governments and leading news players to tackle disinformation. For instance, the Meta journalism project of fact-checking led by the French Press Agency, AFP, involved more

than fifty media organisations during the French 2022 elections. In this way, news agencies are positioned to co-regulate the news environment with platforms and other media, as well as exert their power over selection and verification. Although not explicitly linked to news, but to broader user-generated content, platforms’ content moderation is mainly taking place in the Global South (as documented, for example, by Roberts, 2019). The objective is to squeeze costs with no guarantee that the interests of the South are represented. This type of content continues to benefit from moderation in the dominant languages (English, French and Portuguese, for instance) with less regard for other languages. This would require (human and monetary) resources that platforms are still unwilling to dedicate to this crucial activity, although the quality of their service for users depends on it. Here also, there is a two-tiered level of governance with automated moderation for most of the content and languages and a differentiated human moderation for specific countries and users in the North.

The power of platforms has led to calls for regulation in order to increase compliance and establish laws on intellectual property, privacy (such as GDPR), antitrust, tax avoidance and dissemination of disinformation. A capacity to disrupt news flow on a continental scale became apparent in 2021 when Facebook and Google were targeted by an Australian legislation designed to ensure payment for the news they distribute. Massive lay-offs and cut-off plans, as well as closer regulation by administrative and supranational authorities such as European rulings like the DSA/DMA, are pushing platforms toward a cautious dynamic of innovation regarding privacy, targeted advertising and news distribution. Despite this new situation, very large digital platforms remain influential. Therefore, it is still a pressing issue to unveil their logic of expansion, domination and control over news distribution, including how traditional news providers adapt to them. The platforms’ regulation and governance must be monitored by civil society and the scientific community, if we are to move toward a more politically and culturally pluralistic news environment.

This issue gathers three articles, including an interview of Tristan Mattelart by Chris Paterson and papers by Raphaël Lupovici and Darsana Vijay, presented during a ICA pre-conference held in Paris on May 26, 2022: a collaboration between Sorbonne Nouvelle and Leeds University. Mattelart’s interview usefully builds on this introduction with a historical perspective and reference to the scholarship of (critical) political economists of communication about news flows, updated by review of research on platforms. It suggests connections and continuities, rather than forgetting those research legacies. Darsana Vijay then explores how local news players in India have to adapt the way they

present news to audiences according to the advertising logic of Facebook, and Raphael Lupovici's contribution concerning the Yellow Vests and Freedom Convoys invites us to think about the (redefinition of) borders between journalism and social activism when mediated by platforms.

Far from closing the topic, we would like to envision this work as a step on the road of documenting and analyzing what is at stake when international platforms take over the newscape, affecting global news circulation and diversity in ways that remain poorly understood. Many questions are still unanswered and could become paths for future research: How accountable are tech giants regarding their impact on media economies and cultural industries? How can we imagine a 'free and balanced circulation' of online news

that would not be market-oriented or politically controlled by governments but would empower citizens? In what ways does algorithmic control over news flow influence public debate? Does YouTube actively contribute to news diversity, and if so, how? Are TikTok and Snapchat more prone to news diversity than incumbent platforms like Facebook or Google? What are the opportunities to resist or reduce the power of platforms over international news flow? And how do we, in our collective interest for the future of the many, regulate the private power of Tech Giants when they threaten democracy and society?



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