



The meaning of digital platforms: Open and closed television infrastructure



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 May 2015

Received in revised form 18 November 2015

Accepted 19 November 2015

Available online 19 December 2015

Keywords:

Comparative method

Emerging/new technology

Internet/WWW effects

Theory

ABSTRACT

Globally, analog television platforms are in steady decline, while digital platforms proliferate. This shift has considerable socio-economic and cultural implications that are too often ignored by the existing economic and political economy literatures. This article surveys key patterns in the adoption of digital platforms across Europe, and finds, based on an array of quantitative metrics, apparently contradictory trends. We observe, on one hand, the rise of closed TV platforms as the paradigmatic commercial model of the new media landscape; but on the other, the cultural and material openness of the Internet, which is radically transforming the consumption of television. While hybrid arrangements abound, industry solutions are still awkwardly matched to consumer preferences. Without drawing too sharp a line between technology and culture, the article presents an overview of the many ways the changing meaning of digital platforms continues to shape the global television industry.

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1. Introduction: digital platforms as meaningful technologies

Analog television platforms are in decline, while digital platforms are proliferating worldwide. This shift has considerable socio-economic and cultural implications that are too often ignored when approaching the issue from the economic optics of “substitution” effects (see [Corbett, 2001](#), for a cogent critique), or the political economic viewpoint, which focuses on the colonization of the Internet by big media conglomerates (e.g. [Chan-Olmstead and Chang, 2003](#); [Murray, 2005](#)). Both approaches place the notion of “distribution” at the center of their conception of technology. From these perspectives, technology is a de-culturalized system that unproblematically transmits content, with only occasional nods to the role of technologies in value generation and media consumption. This article advances a more cultural look at these issues. Without drawing too sharp a line between technology and culture, the article investigates the growing meaning of digital platforms and their cultural–economic effect.

The question we pursue throughout this article is why market players repeatedly fail to capitalize on the emerging capacity for “closing” the televisual signal. Why do we still have open, and sometimes radically open, digital platform access? What accounts for the endurance of a broadcast logic in an age of apparently isolated and individualized viewing habits? We structure our argument around a variety of metrics describing the European television industry, usage patterns of digital technology in Europe, and global media developments. Throughout the analysis, we privilege the case of Spain within the

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European context in order to focus our discussion, but the patterns we observe are transcultural in nature. The reason for this, as we shall argue below, is that the meaning of digital platforms diffuses alongside those platforms.

After outlining the theoretical stakes of the project, we describe our case study, the contemporary Spanish television industry, and describe our data and methods of analysis. We begin our empirical discussion by investigating the “closed” television platform as a structure of meaning, where the question of distinction is key, and which is represented here by the rise of prestigious series, also called “quality tv”, backed by Pay-TV corporations (McCabe & Akass, 2007). We then argue that the “open” platform of the Internet, often imagined as draining revenue from the industry, can instead be productively viewed as a fundamental source of value for television. We next turn to consider a series of hybrid corporate strategies that blend closed television and open Internet logics. In the concluding section, we return to the theoretical questions of the first section and offer some comments on the future of “openness” and “closedness” in the European television industry.

2. Theoretical considerations

This article traces the cultural horizon within which two broad processes are clashing and, at times, fusing together at the very center of the global television industry. As such, we traverse a broad field of theoretical considerations, addressing, in turn, the theory of open and closed platforms; the critical cultural policy studies literature; and finally the broadly Durkheimian tradition concerned with the meaning of technologies in social life. Each of these theoretical traditions casts light on the central paradox confronting media owners, namely how to balance their economic incentive to close the televisual signal with the openness of the Internet.

The first of the two processes is the shift from a largely open analog signal that is broadcast for free over the air to a largely closed digital signal that is increasingly received through paid satellite feeds or through paid cable connections. Although this process began with the introduction of subscription-based cable television in 1949, it has changed dramatically in the past decade as national marketplaces have ended analog transmission entirely (Iosifidis, 2014: 12). Emblematic of the dominance of the closure of the televisual marketplace, the digital conversion has proceeded alongside the rise of premium content provided through paid services, famously represented in the United States by HBO, but also reflected in many national marketplaces. The term “closedness” here refers to the capacity for powerful actors to exert control over a cultural object, either at a broad level of monopoly capitalism or through more targeted capacities to prevent piracy, to restrict access and otherwise shape the use of their products. This is a relative and not absolute concept.

The second of the two processes is the eroding of the barrier between television and the Internet. New technological capabilities give viewers the opportunity not only to illicitly download and share television content at no cost, but also to create new communities of viewers, new practices of viewing, and new associations between the “open” ethic of the Internet and television. The term “openness” offers an entry point to capture the fundamental features of the cultural structure of the Internet. “Openness” here is symbolically aligned with trust, which moves the term away from its Popperian, Enlightenment notion and closer to the Bergsonian interpretation (Sanz, 2014). Openness has come to symbolize the central democratic aspects of the Internet, the utopian discourse that embodies the mythical aspirations to achieve “freedom” and “shared humanity” through electronic means. Yet, as an open technology, the Internet achieves a particular symbolic status that clashes in a fundamental way with key aspects of the culture of private and public bureaucracies, including media industries.

This discontinuity cannot be reduced through either an idealistic lens as a regeneration of a Habermasian “public sphere” or conversely the sceptical lens of a gradual colonization of the Internet by big media conglomerates (Papacharissi, 2004). Rather, it implies, as we will argue below, that the dynamics of openness and closedness meaningfully modulate the technological platforms of distribution used by the industry. After all, as we will note below, the Internet did not originate from a commercial project or from a commercial culture, a historical fact which underlies the difficulties in finding, in the new media environment, a business model for audiovisual goods. Conversely, the ownership of European media is itself a “closed” signal, a fact recently critiqued by civil society advocates (e.g. Darbishire & Harrison, 2012). Powerful actors take refuge from public oversight behind opaque legal documents, but this may in turn prompt more or less potent calls for openness and transparency. At the ownership level, such calls are relatively easy to resist, but in the crowded marketplace of European television service providers, the symbolic call for openness has real power.

Much of the cultural coding that links the Internet with openness and television with closedness has roots in the unique cultural conversations of the United States and its particular notions of democracy. Nevertheless, the global television industry has many distinctive regional variations and traditions (Sinclair, Jacka & Cunningham, 1996), and so we expect states to reflect differences in how the meanings of these platforms are combined or held separate. In all cases, however, we expect the meaning of media platforms to have broad political and economic consequences. After all, democracies are inevitably caught in a struggle to balance the need to open power to the masses while closing access to power for the sake of expediency and security. On one hand, television policy represents a significant site of contestation between private and public interest. Some states, such as Finland (Evens, Verdegem & De Marez, 2010), excel at balancing the interests of stakeholders, but this reflects an unusually long and fruitful tradition of cooperation between government, education, and industry. Because best practices in this industry often depend on a deep architecture of public–private cooperation, differences in culture are expected to have correspondingly greater power in explaining differential outcomes.

On the other hand, cultural literacy is given political significance through Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) notions of habitus and cultural capital. Cultural policy scholars have traced how this is manifested in a variety of contemporary polities, noting the ways in which policy aims to coordinate taste, conduct, and political attitudes (McGuigan, 2004; Sassatelli, 2007: 29).

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