

Anatomy of platform power capitalism

Faces, forms, and regulation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the complex nature of platform power in the digital age and covers over 80 journal articles published between 2017 and 2025. Drawing from political economy literature and Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital, we identify ten distinct forms of platform power: capital, political, control, data, infrastructure, hegemony, exploitation, commercialisation, corporate, and monopoly. We explore how super platforms acquire, exercise, and expand their influence, and show how Big Tech corporations undermine state sovereignty and fight regulatory efforts. Our findings highlight the immense economic and political leverage of these platforms and their ability to shape the global order. We argue that an integrated perspective is essential to comprehend the static and dynamic architecture of platform power in its complexity.

KEYWORDS: platform power, Big Tech power, faces and forms of Big Tech platform power, platform power capitalism

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Introduction

The acquisition of Twitter/X by Elon Musk and the politically charged repositioning that followed has highlighted how closely economic platform power and political influence are now intertwined. The case illustrates a wider structural shift of sovereignty: Key infrastructures of public communication are increasingly subject to private control and strategic instrumentalisation.

To analyse platforms as carriers of societal power, rather than neutral intermediaries or market actors, in this chapter we draw on Bourdieu's (1986) field and capital theory, Lukes's (2005) multidimensional understanding of power, and Foucault's (1975/1987) and Deleuze's (1990/1993) accounts of disciplinary and control societies. Together, these perspectives show that platform power in digital capitalism operates infrastructurally (through ownership and control of digital environments), behaviourally (through algorithmic steering and classification), and hegemonically (through the shaping of norms, expectations, and problem frames). Therefore, we proceed in two steps: We develop a conceptual anatomy of platform power across ten analytically distinguishable power forms, and we analyse the tensions and limitations of existing regulatory responses.

The objective is to make the power architecture of platform capitalism visible and, on this basis, reopen the question of democratic counter-power and transformative institutional alternatives.

The sociological foundations of power

Engaging with power theories or dealing with power from a scientific and disciplinary perspective is anything but self-evident. Some academic disciplines and discourses on platforms attempt to do without the power perspective and struggle when their peers urge them to incorporate it. Nevertheless, power is one of the most contested concepts in social sciences.

As an introduction from a social science perspective, Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of field and capital are suitable for exploring the power terrain of super platforms. In Bourdieu's view, a field is a structured and institutionalised social space – a structured battlefield or contested arena where actors, organisations, and institutions compete for dominance, shaping interests, norms, and ideologies through various forms of power and capital. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts offer an initial framework for understanding and analysing the complex power structures in the context of super platforms and the differentiated forms of platform power.

Michel Foucault's (1976/1988) concept of the “subjectivation of power” illustrates that power is not merely repressive, but also productive and constitutive for individuals. Peter Fleming and André Spicer (2014) demonstrated that modern organisations also rely on subtle forms of power exertion by shaping the self-identity and desires of their employees. Foucault

(1975/1987) introduced the concept of “disciplinary power”, whereas Gilles Deleuze (1990/1993) coined the term “control power”. Disciplinary power functions through surveillance, standardisation, and regulation of individual behaviour. Similarly, control power is based on continuous monitoring and modulation of behaviour within relatively open structures.

Probably the most well-known sociological theory of power is Steven Lukes’s (2005) concept of the three dimensions of power conflicts: open, hidden, and invisible. In the first dimension, power conflicts are openly recognisable, making it relatively clear who holds power, exercises it, and enforces their interests despite resistance. In the second dimension, power holders can prevent apparent problems and conflicts that could threaten their interests. These latent conflicts are neither publicly articulated nor politically addressed through formal channels. Lukes (2005: 21) further distinguished between the exercise of power through influence, coercion, authority, violence, and/or manipulation. According to Lukes, the third dimension is the most comprehensive and lasting form of power, as it leads to fundamental transformations of values, rules, and standards at the individual, collective, and structural levels. This third dimension explores the complex and subtle manifestations of power, where economic, political, or cultural institutions appear as opaque or even invisible disciplining power structures, operating without overt influence, coercion, or manipulation. On the one hand, the three authors listed open up complementary approaches that enable a differentiated concept of platform power capitalism. On the other hand, however, there are also common grounds. Thus, power is understood not only as coercion, but also as embedded in social relationships, as structuring and productive. In short, power is usually situational, relational, contextual, and contested at the same time.

Building upon Barnett and Duvall (2005), Fuchs (2005), and Fleming and Spicer (2014), we expand the dimensions of power into the following six faces:

- **Instrumental power:** The focus is on the visible enforcement of corporate interests exercised by Big Tech companies in political, economic, cultural, or social contexts.
- **Institutional power:** Super platforms determine organisational structures, rules, regulations, contracts, and norms of punishment and reward, which apply to all stakeholders in a differentiated yet binding manner.
- **Structural power:** The focus is on the direct and indirect embedding of all stakeholders. The positions of power of super platforms in different contexts are recorded. Structural power turns out to be systemic and long-lasting, but often also subtle.
- **Discursive power:** It refers to the legality and legitimacy of companies. These actors position themselves in public discourses and shape opinions

and narratives. The focus is on the sovereignty of interpretation over corporate and social goals, terms, and narratives.

- **Manipulative power:** Super platforms influence stakeholder behaviour and perceptions by presenting information, decisions, or actions in a way that subtly directs people in a desired direction without their conscious awareness. This psychological and emotional control is carried out via “nudging” or recommendation systems.
- **Invisible power:** This form of power reaches its peak in opacity. Hidden or invisible power exertion occurs subtly, even insidiously. Particularly, the algorithmic power of super platforms is based on the ability to exercise more or less invisible power through corporate control of algorithms. Algorithmic power is not only invisible but also repressive or subversive. It can lead to the normalisation and habitualisation of asymmetries and dependencies.

What is missing in literature is a systematic, power-based debate that transfers concepts from Lukes, Bourdieu, Foucault, and others to platform dynamics, bringing together the multiple dimensions of platform power (economic, political, infrastructural, epistemic, hegemonic, etc.) in a consolidated analytical framework. Based on an initial analysis of power issues in the context of Big Tech corporations such as Amazon, Alphabet, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, Alibaba, Tencent, and ByteDance, we propose ten forms of platform power (see Table 13.1). The six faces of power are subsequently applied to the ten selected forms of platform power to provide a concrete theoretical frame of analysis. This selection is by no means exhaustive, as both political–economic perspectives and social science literature provide numerous other relevant concepts within the platform power discourse.

Table 13.1 Selected forms (dynamics) of platform power, and its faces (i.e., manifestations of how platform power is exercised)

Six faces of power	Ten forms of platform power
instrumental	capital
institutional	political
structural	control
discursive	data
manipulative	infrastructure
invisible	hegemonic
	exploitative
	commercialisation
	corporate
	monopoly

The diverse faces and forms of platform power

From the perspective of critical political economy, the platform power of Big Tech platforms comprises multiple central components that dynamically create and sustain structural power asymmetries. These dynamic mechanisms – the diverse forms of platform power, essentially, what platforms do – are integral to contemporary societal dynamics shaped by super platforms’ pursuit of power, hegemony, dominance, colonisation, and exploitation. Critical political economy views the power of super platforms as a combination of societal hegemony, economic control, regulatory influence and cultural steering of social discourses. Super platforms instrumentalise their dominant power positions to dictate market conditions, suppress competition, and extract private profits from various societal spheres at the expense of civil society and democratic processes.

Capital power

Capital power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to mobilise and deploy financial resources in ways that shape market structures, competitive dynamics, and political options. High market capitalisation, stable cash flows, and privileged access to global capital markets provide super platforms with a degree of financial flexibility that fundamentally distinguishes them from other economic actors.

Additionally, super platforms pursue an active financialisation strategy, which aims to optimise returns and capital flows through share buybacks and dividend payments.

As of 31 December 2025, the combined market capitalisation of Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet, Amazon, and Meta amounted to about 15.7 trillion US dollars (statmuse, 2025). The exorbitant capital power of super platforms is also evident when they face financial penalties: In 2025, Alphabet (Google), Apple, and Meta were fined a combined 3.65 billion euros by the European Commission (2025).

In its most direct form, capital power is exercised through strategic investment decisions. Platform companies use financial resources to acquire potential competitors, secure start-ups with promising technologies, influence pricing structures, and control supply chains. Capital thus functions *instrumentally* as a means to expand market reach, neutralise competitive threats, and consolidate dominance within platform ecosystems.

Over time, this financial strength acquires *institutional* relevance. Capital-rich platforms are able to influence regulatory processes, standard-setting procedures, procurement logics, and governance arrangements. Their economic weight translates into privileged access to policy arenas, where financial capacity becomes embedded in formal rules and organisational frameworks.

The *structural* dimension of capital power lies in the asymmetric dependencies it produces. High market capitalisation and predictable revenue streams allow platforms to raise large volumes of capital under favourable conditions, enabling long-term investment strategies that competitors and public actors cannot match. These structural advantages constrain the strategic options of others, who must anticipate the reactions of financially dominant firms.

Capital power also stabilises itself *discursively*. Platform companies deploy media strategies, corporate communications, and economic narratives that frame financial scale as a prerequisite for innovation, efficiency, and digital progress. Market dominance is thus presented as socially beneficial or systemically necessary rather than as a concentration of power.

Manipulative capital power unfolds through the design of incentive structures and contractual arrangements. Platforms leverage their financial position to steer the behaviour of business partners, developers, and public institutions through funding dependencies, preferential conditions, and selective investment. Participation remains formally voluntary, yet is shaped by capital-induced asymmetries.

Finally, capital power becomes *invisible* where the growth-oriented logic of the platform economy is treated as a natural foundation of economic and political decision-making. Scaling, financialisation, and profit maximisation appear self-evident, while alternative economic arrangements recede from view. Capital power thus persists not only through active deployment, but also through its normalisation as an unquestioned condition.

However, structural, discursive, manipulative, and invisible forms of power are not immediately recognisable and must be regarded as hidden or even invisible. For this reason, these forms of power should be studied more intensively, rather than marginalised as a “black box” simply because empirical evidence is difficult or impossible to obtain through conventional academic research.

Political power

While capital power provides the material basis of platform dominance, its broader societal impact becomes visible where financial resources are translated into political influence. Thus, political power unfolds at the point where economic capacity enables platform companies to shape regulatory frameworks, public policy priorities, and state decision-making processes.

While social science research has heavily focused on the market power of tech corporations and often treated as synonymous with platform power, the political power of Big Tech is increasingly becoming the focus of social science research.

Political power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform

companies to influence political decision-making, regulatory frameworks, and public policy priorities without formally exercising state authority. Rather than operating through direct confrontation with governments, platform political power is exercised through layered mechanisms that gradually constrain democratic steering capacity.

At the most immediate level, political power is exercised through targeted intervention in political processes. Platform companies deploy lobbying activities, legal strategies, advisory roles, revolving-door personnel exchanges, and political donations to influence legislative agendas, regulatory drafts, and administrative decisions. In this *instrumental* form, political power appears as deliberate engagement within concrete arenas of policymaking.

As these practices stabilise, political power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Platform actors participate in expert committees, public–private partnerships, standard-setting bodies, and consultative processes that shape governance arrangements over time. Regulatory procedures and administrative routines increasingly adapt to platform business models, technological timelines, and organisational logics, allowing private interests to become sedimented within formal institutions.

The *structural* dimension of political power operates more indirectly. The economic, technological, and infrastructural significance of major platforms generates dependencies that narrow the range of politically feasible options. Public authorities often adjust decisions in anticipation of potential investment withdrawal, technological disadvantage, or infrastructural disruption. Political outcomes are thus shaped less by overt pressure than by preemptive accommodation.

Political power is further stabilised through *discursive* mechanisms. Platform companies frame regulation as a threat to innovation, competitiveness, or digital progress, while presenting themselves as indispensable partners in economic modernisation and technological development. These narratives shift the boundaries of what appears politically reasonable, legitimate, or realistic.

Manipulative political power unfolds through the strategic shaping of political decision-making environments. By exploiting information asymmetries, technical complexity, and selective expertise, platforms steer policymakers toward platform-compatible problem definitions and solution spaces. Decisions remain formally sovereign yet are substantively pre-structured.

Finally, political power becomes *invisible* where political systems tacitly adapt to the dominance of large platforms. The assumption that platform actors are unavoidable, systemically relevant, or beyond effective regulation becomes normalised. Democratic institutions increasingly adjust to platform power rather than actively contesting it, subtly reconfiguring political authority.

Control power

Political influence alone does not account for the depth of platform-based domination. Platform power deepens where companies not only shape rules and policies, but directly intervene in information flows and behavioural processes through algorithmic, intermediary, and surveillance-based mechanisms of control.

Control power in platform power capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to systematically monitor, steer, and predict behaviour, information flows, and decision-making processes. It integrates algorithmic control, intermediary power, gatekeeper functions, and data-driven surveillance into a form of power that operates directly on the conditions of digital interaction.

At the level of direct intervention, control power is exercised through algorithmic systems that regulate visibility, prioritisation, and access. Search rankings, recommendation systems, moderation tools, and automated decision-making processes determine what users see, which options are foregrounded, and which actions are constrained. Control thus functions *instrumentally* as a continuous, real-time modulation of behaviour and attention.

As these control mechanisms stabilise, they become embedded in organisational and regulatory routines. Platform-defined moderation standards, access conditions, and AI governance frameworks acquire a quasi-normative character and are frequently adopted by state agencies, firms, and civil society organisations. In this *institutionalised* form, private control architectures are normalised as legitimate governance solutions.

The *structural* dimension of control power arises from the central intermediary position that platforms occupy within digital ecosystems. Dependence on AI systems, interfaces, app stores, cloud services, and social networks limits the practical alternatives available to users, businesses, and public institutions. Control is exercised less through coercion than through the structuring of environments in which deviation becomes costly or impracticable.

Big Tech primarily exerts its influence through the control of information on digital platforms such as social media and search engines (Khanal et al., 2025), particularly considering that in some countries, more than half the population relies on digital platforms as their primary source of information.

Control power is further stabilised *discursively*. Platform companies frame algorithmic steering and surveillance as necessary for security, efficiency, personalisation, and user convenience. These narratives present control as a technical service rather than a political intervention, thereby depoliticising its societal effects.

Manipulative control power unfolds through the design of digital choice architectures. Nudging, adaptive interfaces, feedback loops, and personalised content subtly guide perception and behaviour without explicit enforcement.

Users remain formally autonomous, yet their actions are systematically channelled by platform-defined parameters.

Finally, control power becomes *invisible* where algorithmic monitoring and behavioural steering are accepted as ordinary features of everyday digital life. Control ceases to appear as an exercise of power and is reinterpreted as normal functionality, allowing it to evade sustained democratic scrutiny.

Data power

While control power operates through the continuous steering of behaviour and information flows, its effectiveness depends on the constant generation and processing of data. Therefore, data power constitutes the epistemic and operational foundation upon which algorithmic control, surveillance, and predictive governance become possible.

Data power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to collect, aggregate, analyse, and operationalise vast quantities of data in order to advance economic, political, and societal objectives. It does not rest on data ownership alone, but on structural control over data flows, access rights, and interpretive processes that render data actionable.

At the most immediate level, data power is exercised through the targeted use of data to optimise business models and steer behaviour. Platform companies employ data-driven analytics to manage prices, content visibility, advertising, recommendations, and work processes. By retaining exclusive control over collected data, platforms secure *instrumental* operational advantages while limiting access for users, regulators, competitors, and independent developers.

As data practices stabilise, they acquire *institutional* relevance. Platform-specific rules governing data collection, interfaces, usage rights, and proprietary formats are increasingly formalised and adopted by public and private actors. In this institutionalised form, private-sector data logics become embedded in governance arrangements and acquire legal and normative force.

The *structural* dimension of data power emerges from asymmetric dependencies. Super platforms accumulate data in volume, granularity, and timeliness that remain inaccessible to other actors. This concentration restricts the scope for innovation and action by competitors, public institutions, and civil society, as power derives from control over indispensable data infrastructures and, in some cases, exclusive access to critical data sources.

Data power is further stabilised *discursively*. Platform companies frame data-driven practices and decisions as objective, neutral, and evidence-based. By presenting analytics as rational and efficient, they obscure the normative assumptions, selection mechanisms, and power interests

embedded in data processing, thereby elevating data to the status of authoritative knowledge.

Manipulative data power unfolds through the personalised deployment of data to shape perception, preferences, and behaviour. Profiling, segmentation, and predictive modelling adapt decision environments at the individual level. Autonomy remains formally intact yet is systematically conditioned by data-driven interventions.

Finally, data power becomes *invisible* where continuous data extraction and processing are accepted as self-evident prerequisites of digital participation. The transformation of social practices into data appears normal and unavoidable, allowing data extraction to function as a naturalised basis of social organisation and power distribution.

Infrastructure power

Data power depends not only on the availability of data, but on the infrastructures through which data are generated, stored, processed, and circulated. Therefore, infrastructure power shifts platform power to a prior level by shaping the material and technical conditions under which data-driven coordination and control become possible.

Beyond the concepts of market power and data power, infrastructure power is also widely discussed in the social science literature. Often, infrastructure power is implied within data power, just as data power is frequently included within infrastructure power. Julie E. Cohen (2024) has referred to data infrastructures and has described three co-constitutive processes: the datafication of infrastructure, the extraction and appropriation of data, and the infrastructuralisation of data. Similarly, Sophie Flensburg and Signe Sophus Lai (2023) have understood data infrastructures as an evolution of the concept of “infrastructural power”, asserting that this perspective provides valuable insights into how digital power is acquired, exercised, maintained, and reinforced in modern communication environments.

Infrastructure power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to provide, control, and orchestrate core digital infrastructures upon which economic activity, social interaction, and public administration increasingly rely. It operates at a pre-conditional level, as it defines the technical environments within which other forms of platform power are exercised.

In its most direct form, infrastructure power is exercised through operational control over cloud services, data centres, operating systems, network services, application stores, and development environments. By granting, restricting, or withdrawing access, adjusting prices and performance parameters or discontinuing services, platform companies deploy infrastructure *instrumentally* as a strategic means of control.

As reliance on these infrastructures deepens, infrastructure power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Public administrations, firms, educational institutions, and research organisations adapt procurement practices, security standards, and organisational workflows to platform-provided infrastructures. Privately owned technical architectures thereby acquire quasi-public status and become integral to institutional functioning.

The *structural* dimension of infrastructure power lies in the dependencies produced by this embedding. High switching costs, lock-in effects, and the scarcity of interoperable alternatives limit the practical choices of users, organisations, and states. Infrastructure power stabilises itself through self-reinforcing dynamics that reduce the need for continuous intervention.

Infrastructure power is further normalised *discursively*. Platform infrastructures are framed as efficient, scalable, innovative, or unavoidable solutions to digital transformation. Public or cooperative alternatives are often portrayed as technically inferior or economically unrealistic, rendering infrastructure a neutral background rather than a contested political resource.

Manipulative infrastructure power unfolds through the design of technical architectures, interfaces, and standards. Decisions about interoperability, compatibility, and development pathways shape innovation trajectories and usage patterns without overt coercion. Control is exercised through design choices that privilege platform-centred ecosystems.

Finally, infrastructure power becomes *invisible* where digital infrastructures are perceived as a natural and taken-for-granted layer of social reality. Ownership structures, control mechanisms, and power relations recede from view, while dependence is reinterpreted as technical necessity. Infrastructure thus functions as a silent carrier of platform-based domination.

Hegemonic power

Where digital infrastructures become the taken-for-granted foundation of everyday social, economic, and political practices, platform power no longer operates primarily through access or control. At this point, hegemonic power emerges, stabilising platform dominance through normalisation, consent, and the internalisation of platform-specific conceptions of order.

Hegemonic power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of dominant platform companies to establish their economic interests, technical logics, and normative conceptions of order as socially legitimate and desirable. Rather than relying on direct coercion, hegemonic power operates through the production of consent and the normalisation of platform-centric worldviews that render existing power structures stable and resilient.

At an *instrumental* level, hegemonic power is exercised through sustained investments in public relations, research funding, education, think tanks,

and civil society initiatives. Platform corporations mobilise financial and organisational resources to disseminate interpretations, produce expertise, and occupy discursive spaces in politics, academia, and public debate. Hegemony is thus actively produced rather than passively acquired.

As these practices stabilise, hegemonic power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Platform-specific norms and values increasingly shape training programmes, administrative routines, media practices, standard-setting processes, and regulatory approaches. Through this institutionalisation, platform logics are reproduced across societal subsystems and generate durable dependencies that extend beyond market relations.

The *structural* dimension of hegemonic power lies in the systematic marginalisation of alternative ways of thinking and acting. The dominance of platform-based business models narrows the horizon of political, economic, and social imagination. Alternatives appear unrealistic, inefficient, or outdated, while platform capitalism is perceived as the only viable mode of digital organisation.

Hegemonic power is further stabilised *discursively* through the shaping of narratives, concepts, and problem definitions. Platform companies influence how technological progress, innovation, and social risks are discussed and evaluated. By setting agendas and framing debates, they prioritise corporate perspectives while sidelining questions of power, inequality, and social cost.

Manipulative hegemonic power unfolds through affective and cognitive guidance embedded in digital environments. Algorithmic curation, personalised recommendations, and selective visibility subtly shape perceptions, preferences, and evaluations. These mechanisms operate below the threshold of conscious awareness, reinforcing platform-aligned interpretations of social reality.

Finally, hegemonic power becomes *invisible* where platform capitalism itself is no longer recognised as a historically specific political–economic formation. Its norms, values, and asymmetries are internalised and reproduced without overt acts of domination. Power persists through acceptance rather than enforcement.

Exploitative power

The hegemonic stabilisation of platform-based orders provides the social conditions under which new forms of exploitation become widely acceptable. Exploitative power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to systematically transform labour, attention, creativity, and social interaction into economically exploitable resources. It extends beyond classical labour exploitation by embedding value extraction deeply within everyday digital practices.

The book *Data Grab* by Ulises A. Mejias and Nick Couldry (2024) focuses on the new colonialism enabled by data power and explains how super platforms institutionalise a four-stage form of exploitative power within data colonialism, encapsulated in the formula “explore, expand, exploit, destroy”. In the first phase of the formula, super platforms explore new digital data landscapes to identify where and how they can extract data. They analyse behavioural patterns, user attention, and data from new user bases. After the exploration phase, they expand their sphere of influence to control an increasing number of lucrative data sources. They achieve this expansion through acquisitions, new services, or penetration into new markets and industries. In the exploitation phase, tech companies monetise the collected data for commercial purposes, generating enormous profits, while users – whose data is being exploited – remain unaware of how their information is monetised and receive no fair compensation. The final phase is destruction, in which super platforms eliminate competition and dominate their stakeholders before a counter-hegemonic force can emerge.

In its most direct form, exploitative power operates through the organisation and monetisation of work and user activity. Platform companies structure labour through algorithmic management, fragmented task allocation, performance monitoring, and variable remuneration systems. At the same time, users generate content, data, and social relations that are monetised without corresponding compensation. Exploitation thus functions *instrumentally* through continuous extraction rather than episodic employment relations.

As these practices stabilise, exploitative power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Platform-specific contractual arrangements, employment classifications, and terms of service externalise risks and circumvent established labour protections. Regulatory frameworks adapt slowly or incompletely, allowing exploitative arrangements to persist within legal grey zones.

The *structural* dimension of exploitative power lies in asymmetric dependencies. Platform-mediated work and participation become central sources of income, visibility, or social inclusion, while viable alternatives remain scarce. These dependencies weaken collective bargaining capacity and reinforce unequal power relations between platforms and workers or users, particularly across global value chains.

Exploitative power is further legitimised *discursively*. Platform labour is framed as flexible, entrepreneurial, or empowering, while precarity and insecurity are individualised. Structural exploitation is thus reinterpreted as voluntary participation in innovative labour markets rather than as a systemic power relation.

Manipulative exploitative power unfolds through incentive systems, rankings, gamification, and algorithmic evaluation. These mechanisms steer

behaviour, intensify performance, and align motivation with platform-defined objectives without overt coercion. Control is exercised through continuous feedback rather than direct command.

Finally, exploitative power becomes *invisible* where the ongoing monetisation of work, attention, and social relationships is perceived as a normal feature of digital life. Exploitation ceases to appear as an exceptional condition and is instead embedded in routine participation within platform environments.

Commercialisation power

While exploitative power concerns the concrete extraction of value from labour, attention, and social interaction, commercialisation power captures a broader and more far-reaching dynamic. It unfolds where increasingly more domains of social life are reorganised as markets.

Commercialisation power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to systematically transform previously non- or only partially market-based social practices, relationships, and infrastructures into goods, services, and monetisable markets. It expands capitalist logics deep into everyday life by reorganising social interaction, communication, and access as commercial transactions.

In its most direct form, commercialisation power operates through the active monetisation of social practices. In this *instrumental* form, platform companies convert communication, cultural production, and interaction into advertising spaces, subscription models, transaction fees, or data-driven sales opportunities. In digital advertising markets in particular, dominant platforms exercise significant control over access to valuable advertising space and the pricing of attention.

As these practices stabilise, commercialisation power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Public services, cultural activities, and social infrastructures are increasingly organised through private platform providers. Legal frameworks, procurement practices, and organisational routines adapt to platform-based market models, allowing commercial logics to permeate domains previously governed by public or collective principles.

The *structural* dimension of commercialisation power lies in the gradual displacement of non-commercial alternatives. Platforms construct ecosystems in which participation, visibility, and social interaction are tied to monetised access. Market mechanisms thus become preconditions for social participation, while platform companies shape the basic economic and social conditions under which commercial activity occurs.

Commercialisation power is further legitimised *discursively*. Market-based solutions are presented as efficient, innovative, and user-centred, while public or non-profit alternatives are framed as outdated or inefficient.

Commercialisation appears as a natural consequence of digital modernisation rather than as a contested political process.

Manipulative commercialisation power unfolds through the design of incentive structures, pricing models, and access conditions. Freemium systems, dynamic pricing, personalised offers, and recommendation cascades steer behaviour towards monetised pathways. These mechanisms create the appearance of individual choice while systematically channelling users into commercially advantageous decisions.

Finally, commercialisation power becomes *invisible* where the marketisation of social life is accepted as self-evident. The transformation of interaction, culture, and access into commodities is no longer perceived as a political intervention but as a normal feature of digital environments, allowing commercial expansion to proceed with limited contestation.

Corporate power

The expansion of commercial logics across ever more domains of social life is not a spontaneous market outcome. It is actively organised and stabilised through the internal organisational and epistemic capacities of large platform companies. Corporate power captures this organisational dimension by focusing on how platforms mobilise structures, knowledge, and strategic control to sustain and extend their dominance.

Corporate power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of large platform companies to organise, coordinate, and strategically deploy internal structures, governance mechanisms, and knowledge resources in ways that consolidate economic, political, and social influence. It bundles organisational control with epistemic power, understood as the capacity to produce, control, and legitimise knowledge that underpins platform dominance.

At an *instrumental* level, corporate power is exercised through the targeted mobilisation of internal organisational resources. Platform companies deploy management hierarchies, legal departments, research budgets, and strategic alliances to secure market positions, expand vertically along value chains, and neutralise actual or potential competitors. Organisational capacity thus functions as a direct means of strategic intervention across markets and policy environments.

As these practices stabilise, corporate power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Shareholder-value maximisation, continuous growth, and profitability are translated into organisational priorities that shape investment strategies, research agendas, and governance structures. Heavy investment in research and development supports technological leadership while simultaneously creating barriers to entry and innovation for competitors.

The *structural* dimension of corporate power lies in the ability of super platforms to define market access, technological standards, and

industry practices. Through their organisational scale and control over key infrastructures, platforms establish norms that other actors are compelled to adopt. These standards generate durable dependencies and information asymmetries that reinforce corporate dominance.

Corporate power is further stabilised *discursively* through the strategic production and dissemination of knowledge. Platform companies promote narratives of innovation, responsibility, and technological progress, while selectively funding research, conferences, and academic networks that frame their business models in favourable terms. Epistemic authority thus becomes a central resource for shaping public debate and preempting regulatory intervention.

Manipulative corporate power operates through opaque organisational practices and information asymmetries that are difficult to observe or contest. Algorithmic curation, selective visibility, and restricted access to knowledge resources allow platforms to influence social processes without assuming corresponding responsibility or accountability.

Corporate power becomes *invisible* where organisational and epistemic dominance are perceived as natural attributes of large technology firms. Corporate perspectives come to be treated as neutral expertise, while the political nature of organisational control and knowledge monopolisation recedes from view.

Moreover, algorithmic and epistemic power as expressions of corporate power are particularly prone to misuse. This includes automated, selectively curated, moderated, emotionalised, distorted, or invisibly suppressed news or search results, as well as restricted access to socially valuable knowledge resources. Additionally, the unilateral monetisation of knowledge – without public accountability or transparency – intensifies power asymmetries and dependencies in favour of corporate dominance.

Monopoly power

The organisational and epistemic capacities captured by corporate power do not remain internally confined to platform firms. Over time, their strategic bundling of capital, infrastructure, data, and knowledge translates into durable market dominance. Monopoly power describes the systemic outcome of this concentration process, where platform control becomes stabilised at the level of markets, standards, and competitive conditions.

Monopoly power in platform capitalism refers to the capacity of dominant platform corporations to permanently control markets, standards, and competitive conditions, thereby systematically limiting alternatives. It does not arise from market share alone, but from the long-term consolidation of economic, infrastructural, data-based, organisational, and hegemonic power resources.

In its most direct *instrumental* form, monopoly power is exercised through the active enforcement of dominant market positions. Platform companies deploy aggressive pricing strategies, cross-subsidisation, exclusive contracts, and strategic acquisitions to crowd out, absorb, or preempt competitors. Acquisitions of start-ups, complementary technologies, and intangible assets allow platforms to strengthen core businesses while externalising entrepreneurial risk and securing monopoly rents.

As these practices stabilise, monopoly power becomes *institutionally* embedded. Market-dominant platforms increasingly shape competition and regulatory regimes through lobbying, litigation, and participation in standard-setting processes. Antitrust interpretation, enforcement practices, and regulatory time horizons adapt to the presence of structurally dominant actors rather than restoring effective competition.

The *structural* dimension of monopoly power operates through network effects, economies of scale, and lock-in dynamics. The concentration of users, data, and infrastructures generates self-reinforcing feedback loops that raise barriers to entry and render market access for new actors increasingly impracticable. Monopoly power thus stabilises independently of continuous intervention.

Monopoly power is further normalised *discursively*. Platform dominance is framed as efficiency, convenience, or natural market consolidation, while competition is portrayed as fragmentation or loss of quality. Large platforms present themselves as indispensable coordination infrastructures, recasting concentration as a social benefit rather than a political-economic problem.

Manipulative monopoly power unfolds through the strategic control of dependencies. By setting technical standards, interfaces, contractual conditions, and access rules, platforms bind users, firms, and complementors to their ecosystems. Formal freedom of choice persists yet is substantively undermined by switching costs and structural dependence.

Finally, monopoly power becomes *invisible* where monopolistic structures are no longer perceived as problematic but as functional solutions. Dominant platforms appear as a natural component of digital order, while competition is dismissed as obsolete. Monopoly power thus persists through normalisation rather than overt enforcement.

Summarising note: Typology as heuristic framework

The ten forms of platform power developed in this contribution are neither arbitrary nor exhaustive. They constitute an analytical instrument designed to capture the economic, political, social, cultural, and technological dimensions of platform power at a medium level of abstraction. Rather than forming a closed or canonical system, the typology is intended as a heuristic framework

that remains compatible with classical and contemporary concepts within and beyond critical political economy.

The typology deliberately departs from reduced, market-centred perspectives by foregrounding power relations that extend beyond price mechanisms, competition and efficiency. In doing so, it offers a political–economic analysis of digital societies in which platforms operate as central ordering actors.

Importantly, the analytical grid does not suggest that platform power consists of discrete or additive resources. Instead, it conceptualises platform power as a relational constellation in which different forms of power intertwine and mutually reinforce one another. These dynamics shift power to upstream levels, where it increasingly eludes conventional forms of democratic oversight. Platform power capitalism thus names a structural transformation of political economy with far-reaching implications for democratic self-determination, public institutions, and civil society agency.

Platform power capitalism as a relational constellation of power

Taken together, the ten forms of platform power analysed in this contribution describe a structured constellation rather than a collection of isolated mechanisms. Platform power in platform power capitalism emerges from the interaction of economic, political, infrastructural, data-based, organisational, and hegemonic dynamics that mutually reinforce one another across different levels of social organisation.

Capital power provides the material basis of platform dominance, which is translated into political power through influence over regulatory frameworks and policy priorities. Control power and data power operationalise this dominance within everyday digital practices, while infrastructure power shifts platform power to a pre-conditional level by shaping the technical environments on which societies depend. These dynamics are stabilised through hegemonic processes that normalise platform-centric orders and marginalise alternative imaginaries.

On this basis, exploitative and commercialisation power expand the scope of value extraction and marketisation into ever more domains of social life. Corporate power consolidates these dynamics organisationally and epistemically, enabling platforms to coordinate markets, knowledge production, and strategic decision-making. Monopoly power represents the systemic outcome of this process, where platform dominance becomes stabilised at the level of markets, standards, and competitive conditions.

Crucially, platform power operates less through visible confrontation than through structural, discursive, manipulative and invisible mechanisms that pre-structure options before democratic deliberation begins. Platform power capitalism thus describes a political economy in which democratic

governance is not simply challenged ex post, but systematically constrained at its foundations.

In conclusion: Regulation of platform power

We set out to analyse platform power capitalism as a relational constellation of power rather than as a collection of isolated market failures. Building on a typology of ten interrelated forms of platform power, the empirical literature reviewed in this concluding chapter allows for a systematic assessment of how contemporary regulatory approaches engage with the structural foundations of platform dominance.

Since our sample of journal articles focuses on the analysis of platform power and not its regulation, we cannot expect an elaborate debate on governance models. Nevertheless, 35 articles – published in the year 2024 and 2025 – talk about platform politics and its instruments for containing or overcoming platform power.

As expected, the existing or planned state control and regulatory measures are criticised as inadequate in view of a spreading platform hegemony. For example, for Andrea Coveri and colleagues (2025), traditional regulatory instruments such as antitrust law and data protection fail because they neither strive for nor implement the fight against platform power. James Muldoon (2025) has also considered the liberal economic regulatory approach of Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act to be necessary, but also absolutely inadequate. Angela Garcia Calvo and colleagues (2025) noted that none of the existing regimes in the US, EU, China, and India successfully attack the structural platform power. For Charis Papaevangelou and Eugenia Siapera (2025), the case of Greece exemplifies the limits of liberal, reformist regulation, because it leads to the instrument of deregulation. Hazem Ibrahim and colleagues (2024) concluded that regulation in its current form has a system-preserving and not system-changing effect. Shaleen Khanal and colleagues (2025) also noted a regulatory deficit because the Big Tech companies would de facto shape the rules themselves. Dovev Lavie (2024) has also considered the existing regulatory approaches to be necessary, but insufficient, as they would only target symptoms and would not have a systemic effect. Carlos Saura García (2024a) criticised the fragmentation and non-binding nature of existing regulations, which enable inadequate controls by the leading gatekeepers and data monopolists as well as the existing dependence on American and Chinese tech companies. Cecilia Rikap (2024) has also considered conventional regulatory approaches such as antitrust and data protection to be inadequate. Finally, Alexander Gleiss and his colleagues (2023) positioned platform power as a post-democratic form of power that successfully overcomes state, legal, and social control mechanisms.

Therefore, they consider platform power to be structurally and functionally a threat to democracy. On the basis of a meta-analysis, they listed five main reasons for this: first, Big Tech companies usurp market and regulatory functions of the state because “platforms have become serious challengers to the regulator in controlling market access, key conditions and resources” (Gleiss et al., 2023: 1); second, platform corporations are establishing corporate governance mechanisms that would replace public oversight (e.g., content moderation, employment relationships, tax avoidance); third, tech companies are able to systematically exploit regulatory shortcomings due to a lack of cross-border cooperation, a lack of enforcement or implementation, and legal loopholes; fourth, the large platforms succeed in creating algorithmic information asymmetries and lock-in effects that make citizens, consumers, and governments equally dependent; and fifth, Big Tech corporations wield discursive power by presenting themselves as “efficient intermediaries” when in fact acting as gatekeepers and infrastructure providers with quasi-state authority.

However, the somewhat surprising unanimity in the assessment of prevailing regulatory practice dissolves when it comes to formulating and demanding additions or alternatives. While Gernot Grabher (2025) has advocated realistic, pluralistic, sector-specific, and adaptive governance models, Anna Gerbrandy and colleagues (2025: 37) have called for a theory of harm of “protecting the digital public sphere as structure of democracy”. They wanted to transform the economically oriented competition law from an economic to a political-democratic control instrument against platform hegemony. For Angela Garcia Calvo and colleagues (2025), integrated, state-official strategies are needed to ensure sovereignty, competition, and democratic control. Zoetanya Sujon and colleagues (2025) have called for ethical political accountability for the owners of digital infrastructures. For Fikile Masikane and Edward Webster (2025), future regulation must jointly address algorithmic, economic, and social sources of power. Papaevangelou and Siapera (2025) have called for a democratisation of infrastructure policy in terms of ownership and environmental responsibility. Carlos Saura Garcia (2024b) has advocated a democratic socialisation of data, a strengthening of public control bodies to prevent regulatory capture and the development of European alternative infrastructures. Carolin Ioramashvili and colleagues (2024) have recommended, in addition to competition policy interventions against monopolies and systemic structural policy, an orientation towards historical forms of regulation of former network industries such as rail, electricity, and telecommunications, including public control of network monopolies. Filippa Chatzistavrou (2024) expected platform regulation to primarily address democratic and sovereignty deficits with the aim of limiting the political mandate of private-sector Big Tech companies, introducing transparency obligations for lobbying and

revolving doors. In addition, she has called for a repoliticisation of the public sphere in order to initiate a counter-trend to tech public capitalism. While Vali Stan (2024) would have liked to see a structural democratisation of property and data infrastructure, Cecilia Rikap (2024) was heading for a structurally transforming knowledge regulation and called for a fundamental democratisation of knowledge production. These include transparency and disclosure obligations, regulation of academic-industrial dependencies, the promotion of public cloud and data infrastructures, and an anti-monopoly policy in the field of knowledge.

Even though the analysis of platform power and not its regulation was the focus of the selected contributions, some final observations can be formulated that support our power perspective.

When the 35 studies reviewed in this section are grouped along the ten forms of platform power developed in this article, several consistent clusters emerge. The literature shows a strong focus on control power, data power, and selected aspects of monopoly power, particularly in relation to competition law and content moderation. At the same time, capital power, infrastructural dependence, corporate–epistemic power, and hegemonic power receive comparatively less systematic regulatory attention. This imbalance suggests that regulatory efforts tend to concentrate on visible and contestable manifestations of platform power while leaving its less visible, structural foundations intact.

Across regulatory contexts, the literature reveals a striking convergence. Platform regulation predominantly targets downstream effects of platform power such as harmful content, unfair business practices or individual market abuses. By contrast, the upstream power resources that enable and stabilise platform dominance – capital concentration, infrastructural control, data asymmetries, organisational capacity, and hegemonic normalisation – remain largely untouched. As a result, regulation frequently addresses symptoms rather than underlying power relations.

Taken together, the empirical evidence corroborates the central claim of this contribution: Platform power is not primarily reproduced through regulatory gaps or enforcement failures, but through the continued protection of upstream power resources. Interventions that focus on platform behaviour, transparency, or procedural compliance may mitigate individual harms, yet they rarely alter the conditions under which platform power is generated and reproduced. In this sense, regulation often operates as a stabilising rather than a transformative force within platform power capitalism.

This pattern is evident across different political and regulatory models. In the EU, ambitious frameworks such as the Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act introduce important constraints on certain platform practices, but they largely remain within a paradigm of behavioural correction. In the US, fragmented regulatory approaches coexist with strong market concentration

and extensive corporate discretion. In China and in parts of the Global South, state intervention frequently reconfigures platform power rather than constraining it, sometimes reinforcing dominant actors through infrastructural dependence or regulatory alignment. Despite these differences, the empirical literature points to a common outcome: Platform power is reshaped, but rarely reduced.

From the perspective of platform power capitalism, these findings have implications that extend beyond regulatory design. If platform power operates primarily through upstream structural, infrastructural, and hegemonic mechanisms, then regulation cannot be understood as a purely technical or legal task. It becomes a question of democratic power and political economy. Regulation is not only about correcting market failures or disciplining corporate behaviour *ex post*; it concerns the capacity of democratic institutions to intervene in the preconditions under which digital markets, infrastructures, and forms of social coordination are organised.

Without addressing capital concentration, infrastructural dependence, data asymmetries, and organisational dominance, regulatory frameworks risk consolidating the very power relations they seek to contain. Platform power capitalism thus confronts democratic societies with a structural challenge of whether they are willing and able to reclaim political authority over the socio-technical foundations of contemporary digital life. Regulation, sovereignty, and democracy are therefore not separate policy domains, but mutually constitutive dimensions of a contested political-economic order.

The democratic reconstruction and repolitisation of platform power capitalism begins where it is possible to translate the prevailing platform power into institutional, epistemic, cultural, and social counter-power. In other words, it is important that alternative digital infrastructures are set up and governed democratically.

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