

Chapter 4

Education for Sustainable Development and the Platform Society

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ABSTRACT

The chapter explores the risks of the platform society to sustainability and how education for sustainability (ESD) can address these risks. The platform society is built on a business model that depends on network effects and user productivity. It, therefore, with the help of algorithms, bots, and AI, maintains the kind of content that can stimulate user engagement. This content is often related to the polarization of society, the deepening of political conflicts, and the diffusion of biased opinions. The response of ESD can be the concept of devalorisation of society, which means the orientation of the development of society toward the reduction of the ecological costs of human and social habitation. Pedagogical approaches that can embody the concept of devalorisation in ESD include the widespread use in teaching of triple bottom line, meta-analysis of social media information, elaboration of transition scenarios between different futures, and the nurturing of ecological solidarity.

INTRODUCTION

In the 2010s, the rapid proliferation of Internet platforms, defined as “more or less extensive, rule-based and strongly technically mediated social action spaces” (Dolata and Schrape, 2022), and their infiltration into all areas of society—economics, politics, health care, and also education—was an important stage in the organizational design of digitalization into a coherent architecture. Digital platforms, which require investments in hardware and software infrastructure for their development, are primarily an economic phenomenon. Scholars (Evans and Gawer, 2016; Rolf et al., 2022) define platforms as assemblages of digital and physical infrastructures, controlled by a firm, which intermediate transactions between discrete user groups (a ‘multi-sided market’) and depend on network effects: “platforms become more valuable as more users use them” (Evans and Gawer, 2016, p. 6). The expansion of digital platforms has been

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correlated with the emergence of the so-called “gig economy” or “sharing economy” associated with new labor models. The fact that digital platforms are central to this new economy, and that the terms “gig economy” and “sharing economy” do not cover all forms of labor possible through platforms, led to the term “platform economy” (Nielsen et al. 2022).

However, platforms play a role in society far beyond economic interactions. They transform social practices and public values in culture (Nieborg and Poell, 2018), healthcare, public administration and also in education (van Dijck et al., 2018). The significant impact of online platforms on social structures and public values has been epitomized in the “controversial concept” of “platform society” (Ibid., pp. 2-3, 8, 21). Given the emerging nature of platform society, there is no universally accepted clear definition of the concept. Today, this concept is used in academic literature in competition with such concepts as “digital society” “information society” and “algorithmic society” (Schuilenburg and Peeters, 2020). The argument for the term “the platform society” over the above is that it reflects not only the prevailing technology of value creation and power, but also the model of social and economic interactions made possible by information (digital) technology. Based on the literature, the platform society (PS) can be briefly defined as a society in which private and public (state) digital platforms enable and make cheaper (through digital infrastructure), regulate (through algorithms), and extract political or economic profit from (through data collection and processing (Perrotta et al., 2020) any form of interaction and transaction between individuals, corporations, and public institutions.

Thus, the platform society is a society based on a consciously used business model, the key characteristics of which are cost reduction through the network effect and algorithmic regulation of social interactions. The dialectical contradiction at the core of the thus defined platform society is obvious: privately owned platforms support (including by reducing transaction costs) and regulate public processes, while public platforms collect information about citizens, which can be used in the private interests of politicians (or can be sold to private parties by corrupt officials). Meanwhile, the line between private and public interests in the platform society is more blurred than in previous stages and forms of human society. Platforms promote private interests under the banner of (but often at odds with) public values (van Dijck, 2020). This contradiction reaches not only social and economic relations, but also the values and goals of sustainable development. Platforms contribute to reducing the carbon footprint and the pollution of the environment (by the sharing economy), but at the same time, they have made possible a significant increase in individual consumption through the provision of global transactions that allow cheap goods to be ordered on the other side of the world. Platforms of the on-demand economy allow users to get cheap services and find part-time work, but this leads to an overall lower cost of labor and increased poverty.

Educational platforms significantly expand access to knowledge, but they also contribute to the commodification and privatization of knowledge, which has traditionally been seen as a public good. Social media can spread keywords (tags) related to the goals and values of sustainable development, but by making them “trendy,” platforms contribute to their simplification and blurring of the original meaning. For example, under the influence of social networks for the last few years in the Russian language, the adjective “ecological” (“eco-friendly”) has acquired the basic meaning of “polite”, “balanced (style of communication)”, “made with (good) taste”. Finally, social media recommendation systems can help find like-minded people and address social and cultural needs, but they can also replace an individual’s traditional socialization with constant immersion in engaging content (Gilbert et al., 2022, pp. 27-30) and thereby possibly reduce the individual’s receptivity to the values and goals of sustainable development.

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