The World Deserves Better Platforms

The Goal Should Be Empowerment, Not Engagement

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Platforms as a business model have succeeded beyond our wildest dreams, at least in terms of profitability and investment. Big tech has learned how to maximize the value created on platforms by enabling outside actors, while minimizing asset ownership and risk, to increase their own value capture. Platform owners have focused relentlessly on solving the problem of continued engagement, successfully prioritizing activity on platform above all else.

On today's engagement-driven platforms, not enough value is being shared with key stakeholders, such as end consumers and producers (Allen, 2017). In exchange for receiving commodity services that cost little or nothing to provide at scale, end users are exposed to extreme security risks, targeted misinformation campaigns, and repeated privacy violations. People should not have to subject themselves to such extreme risks just to share a picture with family members, discuss something with friends, or sell something from their garage. The world deserves better platforms.

Too much collateral damage is being inflicted, with too much power and wealth concentrating in too few hands. We believe that platform strategies are reinforcing the trend of increased market concentration and winner-take-all profitability across industries, not just big tech.

Two key questions to answer: What should be the new goal, or objective, be for widely used platforms? And how do we get from here to there? As a new platform objective, we suggest pursuing human empowerment as the goal, as argued by the capability approach to technology ethics (Johnstone, 2007). Attempts to change today's platforms are mostly being pursued through government regulations, such as anti-trust enforcement and privacy laws, but in addition we would suggest promoting the growth of alternative platforms through the full spectrum of entrepreneurial activities, including causation, effectuation, and bricolage approaches to innovation (Fisher, 2012). Platforms are too important to be treated as only a strategy or profitability issue for specific companies.

References

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