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BECOMING PLATFORM: DISRUPTION, MASCULINITY, AND INFRASTRUCTURE

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Relevance & Context

My contribution is a theoretical conceptualization of the platform as a disruptive figure - not only in the infrastructural turn towards what scholars have defined as the “platformisation” (Poell, Nieborg & Van Dijk, 2019) of a diverse range of industries, but also as a political metaphor and a vector for social identification. My main focus is on the rise of powerful, hypermasculine figures like Donald Trump, Elon Musk, and Joe Rogan, who notably leverage the concept of (dis)trust towards “mainstream” and “legacy” media in favour of tech platforms like Musk’s own X (formerly known as Twitter) or alt-tech platforms like Donald Trump’s Truth Social or Rumble. While these platforms are presented with a stated emphasis on free speech as a universal value, their usage is also driven and/or associated with strong, even authoritarian personalities, usually characterized by a hyper-masculine persona and US-exceptionalist attitudes.

Significantly, these high-profile figures, brought closer by their accentuated friction with both state institutions and established media during the Covid pandemic, have been able to leverage ideals espoused by early free software movements and later social media platforms, like transparency and “free speech”, to connote their vested political and economic interests as inherently universal and non-political, juxtaposing them to the perceived totalitarianism of content moderation, DEI initiatives, and generally (as Musk called it) the “woke mind virus”. With this premise, each of them has been able to consolidate their influence in part through a range of platforming practices – “platforming” particular individuals and thus widening the Overton window, negotiating cross-platform boundaries, and framing infrastructural discourse (most notably through direct use of social media platforms and podcasting). Given the historical link between extremist movements and the infrastructural needs satisfied by alt-tech platforms (Donovan, Lewis & Friedberg, 2019, 50), the prominent status of these men makes this topic especially urgent.

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My proposal is thus framing the “platform” and “platforming practices” as a key conceptual scaffolding for reading the current cultural momentum of these figures. Positioning the “becoming platform” of Rogan, Musk, or Trump (each of whom have come to embody platforms of sorts – respectively: JRE, X, Truth Social) in the context of the dangerous emergence of a “platformed personality capitalism” founded on “personality as infrastructure” (Rosamond, 2023), I discuss the identity politics of these powerful men and the way they function as discursive catalysts for platformisation as an urgent cultural and political issue.

Research Questions

How does the performance of masculinity enacted by figures like Rogan, Musk, and Trump participate in the shaping of platformisation as a cultural and political project?

How does their framing of “free speech” as both a US-exceptionalist and universalist value, as well as the definition of cultural objects like “cancel culture” or “woke”, contribute to the concentration of power into platforms as, paradoxically, both “neutral” and political as national assets?

Do platforms still offer tools for critique despite promoting the aspiration for users to “become platforms” themselves?

Methods / Case Study

Using the popular Joe Rogan Experience podcast as the main case study, my main argument is that this popular format has facilitated broader cultural shifts that call for urgent critical inquiry from media and communications scholars. Firstly, the personification of complex social and cultural issues like “free speech” into individual battles between individuals and the establishment - e.g. Elon Musk vs liberal Twitter (Ferrari Braun, 2023); Donald Trump vs the US political establishment). Secondly, the rise of “platforming” as both a discursive metaphor and a business model, offered as the only solution for a masculinity in crisis against “woke” and “cancel culture” (Ng, 2022). Thirdly, the trickle-down identification of users with these charismatic, disruptive leaders, facilitated by the architecture of social media as infrastructures for the performance of the self (Bozzi, 2024).

The presentation will combine a media and cultural studies approach with a broader-picture sociological reading that draws from platform studies and Internet studies and a theoretical speculative approach. More specifically, I will analyse the convergence of figures like Rogan, Trump, and Musk around the socio-technical figure of the “platform” by discussing relevant material – primarily clips from the influential Joe Rogan Experience podcast and relevant episodes/reaction videos, but also AI-generated digital art (e.g. the Joe Rogan AI Experience, the infamous Trump Gaza video, or Beppe’s celebratory avatar-ification of these figures through viral digital art), and memes (and meme-coins). The material will be organised in a timeline and discussed in the context of relevant socio-political events.

The goal of the presentation is demonstrating how the cultural positioning of a masculinity under threat, the protection of US tech-exceptionalism, and Silicon Valley business models are increasingly based on the personification of platform-capitalist values and fostering distrust towards state institutions, legacy media, and accountability towards diversity.

Theoretical Contribution

By proposing “becoming platform” as the summative imperative of the age of late social media, I aim to expand the analysis of the platform’s cultural momentum beyond its more literal definition as a techno-social infrastructure founded on multi-sided markets (as it happens in platform studies). Considering a range of platforming practices (e.g. de-platforming, re-platforming, negotiating platform boundaries, framing infrastructural discourse) I position “becoming platform” as a vector of trickle-down identification, where users aspire to accumulate following and ultimately infrastructural power by drawing others into their own systems.

As I will demonstrate by discussing examples of Rogan’s “alternative” media endeavours and platforming practices, as well as meme-coins and other personality-driven platform projects, this “becoming platform” mantra is however paradoxical, provocative, and unattainable. In other words, it is a Ponzi scheme involving multiple tiers: actual billionaire platform owners like Elon Musk and Donald Trump sit on top, establishing the more material infrastructural support at a political-institutional and technological level; one level below, figures like Joe Rogan, Jordan Peterson, and even Andrew Tate (with their “informational” or “educational” platforms) negotiate cultural boundaries within and beyond the grid of mainstream and “alternative” media, challenging trust in traditional experts and intellectuals; at the bottom, crowds of smaller-scale clones aspire to ascend the ranks and “become platform” themselves, mostly remaining stuck at influencer level or, worse, passive users waiting to be bored, radicalised, and/or impoverished by another crypto scam rug-pull. Unlike the “accidental megastructure” described in Benjamin Bratton’s influential book (2015), the “stack” of platformed masculinity is short, tipped in favour of “old-fashioned” neoliberal capitalism, and often driven by reactionary identity politics.

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