We Don't Yet Fully Know What Platforms Can Do
Ten points towards public platformation

In response to the Covid crisis and the continuing lack of PPE equipment available for the critical NHS workers in early 2020, Autonomy authored the brief [“Medisyn: A Platform for UK PPE Provisions.”](#) The brief proposed a platform for coordinating rapid PPE production by 3-D printers and local SMEs, connecting these suppliers with larger NHS procurement systems and leveraging their nimble support for larger scale industry retooling efforts. Medisyn imagined a platform that would provide a more resilient, regenerative, and distributive inventory protocol for NHS provisions than the current portal system. It argued that algorithmic capacity could be leveraged to pool small suppliers to tackle big projects, coordinate services and needs across producers and purchasers, mediate supply and demand flows, automate bureaucratic hurdles, share innovations and research, and ensure compliance. The Medisyn platform would be a mechanism for coordinating production and purchase of assets at scale while supporting local work and economies.

The following working principles were inspired by that brief's approach to platform systems as organizing tools for generating public value rather than private profit. We argue that platforms are a technology and infrastructure that can play a fundamental role in the needed transformation of economic and social ecosystems. Whether run by public or private actors, platforms can and should support public benefit.

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1. **Platforms themselves are not the problem.**

   Most conversations today, from government to academia to technology to the public sphere, focus on the polarizing effects of platforms. They tend to describe platforms as exploitative or liberatory. But these dynamics aren't natural or endemic to platform structures *per se*. The systems, arrangements, and values in which platforms are immersed shape platform logics and effects. We live in a society, this society shapes us, we shape this society, and so on. Platforms synchronize complexity, organizing provisions and politics, communications information and transformation, by hook and by crook. We need to stop seeing platforms as enemies or saviours and consider them for what they are actually capable of and what they might do.

2. **Platforms coordinate at unprecedented scales.**

   Platforms mediate the connections and circulation between people and things, combining top-down constraint and control with bottom-up emergence and adaptation. Platforms are infrastructures which allow things to generate and accelerate by streamlining and standardizing interconnections. National rail systems in the 18th and 19th century were a demonstrative industrial platform and public service, creating conduits between production and people and places, coordinating massive networks of things in transition. Digital platforms today have built upon and in between these platforms' infrastructures, coordinating interaction and transaction at global scale. Because platforms rely on network effects (the more people use a platform, the more appealing it is for more people to use it), they are "natural monopolies" becoming evermore entrenched into the fabric of our lives and economies. Platforms are built to leverage the unique capacities of scale.

3. **Platforms are dynamic infrastructures.**

   As combinations of digital and material layers, contemporary platforms introduce a unique infrastructural logic. Platforms act as junctures between and across agencies and actors, realigning wholly horizontal or vertical orientations: what was static becomes mobile, what was personal becomes shared. The process of platformation is a process of readaptation. Resources previously presumed to be fixed become movable and adjustable. A foundation originally devised for particular things becomes a foundation for many different kinds of things. Platform infrastructures can support ecosystems that evolve and regenerate, synchronize and interoperate. Platforms work by linking, rather than reproducing, non-core capabilities, re-assembling infrastructure in discrete units across value chains. Ten years ago, We Work began streamlining and minimising office overhead, allowing businesses to automatically plug into their digital structures and physical spaces. Workspace went from an expensive capital investment intimately bound up with the identity of a company, to becoming just another interchangeable service with the costs of upkeep absorbed by the platform, which benefits from aggregate scale.

4. **Platforms work for the public…**

   Platforms have emerged as powerful corporate actors that have seized upon market dynamics and market failures. They are often positioned as an alternative to state-run coordination, as a means for preventing centralized state powers and perceived incapacities. The platforms well-known today have gained tremendous power by making things like communications, transportation, information, exchanges more immediate and accessible and flexible, expanding the range of actors that can contribute to the provision of a service in real-time. Peer-to-peer platforms like Uber and Airbnb or social media platforms link convenience, desire, access and connectivity with unparalleled ease and immediacy. But even when platforms are run for a profit, the services they provide mobilize the public at large.

Platforms provide critical, "foundational"[1] services, and in doing so, become utilities serving common needs.

5. …but currently the public works for platforms.

The way private platforms are currently set up and deployed introduces copious downsides: an expanded gig economy, precarity, disruption to public services, monopolization and homogenization, and further distributed debt. Sure – platforms provide what are now critical public services, but they also exploit people and the public purse for private benefit. They focus everything on individual manipulation, taking personal data and turning it into advertising dollars. They accrue tremendous profits by paying unfair wages, or avoid taxes in the jurisdictions in which they operate. They cut corners on essential ecological factors and rely on subsidized government services while aggregating surplus to pay out to investors. The public can no longer afford to fund, directly or indirectly, by subsidies or incentives, a private sector that uses platforms to enrich a few without also benefiting many, and a state that lets the profits pile up in the hands of the already wealthy.

6. Platforms are the perfect tools for public services.

Platforms are ready instruments for an entrepreneurial public sector. As Mariana Mazzuccato well articulates, there is rarely large-scale private innovation without state intervention. From DARPA to NASA, some of the biggest leaps in our technological capabilities have happened thanks to a public sector which made itself the primary risk taker, a visionary leader rather than a reactive moderator. Of course, the challenges we now face as a society are more urgent and complicated than putting men on the moon. Platforms at the service of state missions can mobilise an innovation ecosystem based on coordination rather than competition. The platform capacity for standardization enables diversification, of scale, intention, application – allowing it to coordinate between enterprises across sizes, managing the complexities of a hyper-connected planet. Operating at granular scale through capillary feedback, platforms combine centralized incorporation and distributed innovation. Instead of presuming that platforms must outsource labor and advance exploitation, we can envision platforms as a mode of public 'insourcing,' a mechanism for incorporating and leveraging capacities of work, vision, and intelligence. The 'publification' of critical services can create an economic and ecological commons which distributes capacity across society.

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[1] A concept developed by a group of researchers, mainly based in the CRESC research centre at the University of Manchester, as an alternative to "generic industrial and regional policy focused on next generation tradeable industries and attracting mobile inward investment through competitiveness. […] Foundational includes the material infrastructure of pipes and cables which connect households plus providential services like health and care which citizens rely on".

7. Bureaucracy is best when people don't do it.

Despite its terrible reputation, bureaucracy can also be a tool for liberation. Bureaucracy in moderation can manage and protect against human fallibility and exploitation, just as it can stifle innovation and adaptation. One advantage of platforms is that they can minimize, automate and adapt extensive bureaucracy, fixing protocols for shared standards that enable interoperability and interconnectivity. This allows smaller providers without substantial legal or administrative resources to participate in the benefits of production and distribution at scale. By streamlining the best aspects of regulation and protection, controlling and reinforcing against exploitation, and providing resources for validation and authentication, platforms can support distributed and resilient ecosystems. By mobilizing computational capacity and automating bureaucracy, platforms for the public can undermine inequities and hierarchies just as current platforms tend to reinforce exploitation and oppression.

8. Platforms organize collective capacity.

As platforms organize and leverage social forces, this power can be harnessed to advance collective intelligence. Of course, public platforms require public protocols to work for the public. Transparency, equity, accessibility, sustainability, efficiency, adaptability must be integrated from the outset. Organizational principles, like a ratio of 8:1 earnings, or fairer accounting of venture and returns on state investment, might offer preliminary checks on platform orchestration.

The war-chest of data accrued by various platforms over the past years has already placed a huge amount of know-how and information in private hands. As we begin applying platform logics to new socially productive configurations, leveraging aggregated data and computational capacity towards public purpose, shared interest and collective benefit must be a priority. It will involve compromises both democratic and automatic. Platforms certainly must protect individual privacy and anonymity, but most importantly platforms must be understood and leveraged as a collective, public, planetary good. New priorities must be embedded in infrastructure, just as infrastructural development must be expanded to include the suite of digital and public services upon which we rely. Platforms are a means to account for the interrelationships, contingencies, and complexities of our ever-connected world. By coordinating and re-distributing power and capacity, consolidating in some places and dispersing in others, we can apply knowledge, diversity, and bottom-up innovation towards common benefits across scales.

9. We need to platformize the public and publicize the platform.

Imagine the new infrastructure as a platform of platforms, a matrix of utilities hard and soft, social and material, all serving the public interest, aggregating and activating collective power, distributing capacity and building adaptive civic

infrastructure. Implementing this infrastructure might mean regulating the platforms that exist with policies that enforce public priorities and insist on returns for public value creation. Platform insourcing means the 'publification' of what have been understood previously to be private sector services—in benefit distribution or in ownership. Platforms might be a functional and pragmatic means for aggregating common capacities, generating a distributive reallocation of resources, space and time.

10. We have to want the platforms we need

Certainly, as we design the platforms to come, we must not forget one core platform principle--pleasure. Platforms should leverage collective desire for convenience, which creates time and space for resources and joy. Today, *doing the right thing* - making a sustainable choice or avoiding exploitative practices - is a lonely experience shrouded in a narrative of sacrifice and virtue. Instead, platforms can make *doing the right thing* easy, automatic, mindless. Like private platforms, public platforms must equally engineer inevitability, in experience and in name. That engineering would draw upon deep latent desires that can be surfaced and leveraged towards a reorganization of collective platform power that serves the public and the planet.

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