

Digital Intermediation

Unseen Infrastructure for Cultural Production

Jonathon Hutchinson



DIGITAL INTERMEDIATION

Digital Intermediation offers a new framework for understanding content creation and distribution across automated media platforms – a new mediatisation process.

This book draws on empirical and theoretical research to carefully identify and describe a number of unseen digital infrastructures that contribute to a predictive media production process through technologies, institutions and automation. Field data is drawn from several international sites, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, London, Amsterdam, Munich, Berlin, Hamburg, Sydney and Cartagena. By highlighting an increasingly automated content production and distribution process, this book responds to a number of regulatory debates on the societal impact of social media platforms. It highlights emerging areas of key importance that shape the production and distribution of social media content, including micro-platformisation and digital first personalities. This book explains how technologies, institutions and automation are used within agencies to increase exposure for the talent they manage while providing inside access to the processes and requirements of producers who create content for platform algorithms. Finally, it outlines user agency as a strategy for those who seek diversity in the information they access on automated social media content distribution platforms.

The findings in this book provide key recommendations for policymakers working within digital media platforms and will be invaluable reading for students and academics interested in automated media environments.

Jonathon Hutchinson is the Chair of the Discipline of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. He is a Chief Investigator on the Australian Research Council Discovery Project, *Online News and Media Pluralism*, and is also a Chief Investigator on the eSafety Commission Research project, *Emerging online safety issues: co-creating social media education with young people*.



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Designed cover image: © Getty

First published 2023

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hutchinson, Jonathon, author.

Title: Digital intermediation : unseen infrastructure for cultural production / Jonathon Hutchinson.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2023. |

Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2022052493 (print) | LCCN 2022052494 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781032011486 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032011479 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781003177388 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Digital media—Social aspects—Case studies. | Social media—Social aspects—Case studies. | Automation—Social aspects—Case studies. | Cultural industries—Case studies. | Mass media policy—Case studies.

Classification: LCC HM851 .H865 2023 (print) |

LCC HM851 (ebook) | DDC 302.23/1—dc23/eng/20230130

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022052493>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022052494>

ISBN: 978-1-032-01148-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-01147-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-17738-8 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003177388

Typeset in Bembo

by codeMantra

For Otto
&
Tom & Daphne



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FOREWORD

Digital Intermediation, for Better or Worse

On the morning of 18 February 2021, Australian Facebook users settling into their takeaway coffees and their daily commute – on public transport to work or, if they were unlucky and in COVID-19 lockdown, just from the bedroom to the lounge room – were in for a rude surprise if they tried to check their newsfeeds and favourite pages and groups for the latest headlines: there weren't any. Not on the Facebook pages of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, our public service broadcaster; not on the pages of commercial news outlets; not in the many groups dealing with particular interests from politics to sports; not even on the pages of major public services such as the Bureau of Meteorology or, particularly crucial at the height of the global pandemic, on the pages of federal and state health services that would ordinarily have been providing information on current COVID-19 infection rates and key advice on where to find testing and vaccination centres. Even the Facebook page of *Taste Magazine* had been stripped of its usual fare of recipes and cooking tips. All that remained in even vaguely news-adjacent content was the page of news satire outlet The Betoota Advocate (think The Onion with an Australian accent and funnier jokes), which after only a brief outage turned to celebrating itself as the only 'news' site in Australia still standing, and the fringe propaganda publication *The Epoch Times*, which even Facebook apparently could not bring itself to classify as a news outlet.

Nor could Australian Facebook users find any news updates in their 'personal publics' (Schmidt, 2014), as posted by Facebook friends and acquaintances, or post any such updates themselves. Zip, zilch, nada. As far as Australia was concerned, Facebook was now entirely free of any news content, and Australian users might have wondered if they had somehow woken up in a kinder, gentler, 'Everything Is Awesome' *The Lego Movie*-style world – instead of the permacrisis of economic, climate and pandemic threats they had become accustomed to in recent years. Or, perhaps, they didn't notice this nationwide news outage at all,

focussing instead on all the other, non-news, ways in which Facebook could still be used – to follow and discuss other topics of interest, engage with local and not-so-local communities or maintain social connections at a time when getting together in person was fraught with extra dangers.

What had happened here? After a period of intense negotiations, heated argument, and claims and counterclaims from both sides, by February 2021, the Australian federal government – secure in its belief that all the threats were merely corporate grandstanding and bluffing – had decided to introduce its News Media Bargaining Code (NMBC) legislation into parliament (cf. Leaver, 2021). Vocally resisted by Google, Facebook and other leading industry players from the start, the NMBC would require platforms to negotiate with news organisations to return part of their digital advertising revenue to news publishers, since the users of those platforms were attracted to the ads only because they were placed alongside the content published by news media; Facebook and other platforms, however, preferred to negotiate with the media houses on their own terms, without supervision or coercion by government. Acquiescing to the Australian NMBC might give legislators in more powerful regions – say the United States or EU – ideas. Thus, Facebook threatened that if the NMBC were to become law, it would simply ban all news content from the Australian Facebook, and indeed ban all Australian news content from Facebook, globally. And when the Australian government decided to press ahead with its legislation regardless, it did just that – hence the rude surprise (or perhaps just mild confusion) experienced by Australian Facebook users on the morning of 18 February 2021.

But this isn't just a story of an inept government falling for its own rhetoric, or of an evil technology giant riding roughshod over a defenceless polity at the ends of the world: it is, ultimately, the story of how the many threads and facets of digital intermediation that Jonathon Hutchinson so masterfully uncovers in this book join together to produce the complex, complicated and conflicted communicative environment within which we all operate today. The Facebook News Ban, as it became known in Australia and beyond, is in a sense the story of a major, critical, digital intermediary within our global network of communication and interaction – Facebook – refusing to intermediate any more, at least until its demands were met (and eventually, they were, with Facebook essentially exempted from the NMBC and left to conduct negotiations with news media outlets on its own terms). It is, additionally, the story of another important digital intermediary – the government in its policymaking and regulatory functions (and note that Hutchinson rightly identifies policymaking as a type of intermediation infrastructure, too) – attempting to exercise its powers to shape the commercial frameworks of digital intermediation processes; and, as it turns out, it is the story of the government largely failing to do so, and having to recognise that at least in this case digital intermediation via technology is considerably more powerful and immediate than digital intermediation via policymaking.

Further, of course, it is the story of a conflict between two different categories of digital (and cultural) intermediaries that each operates through

both technology and content: platform providers and news organisations. The Facebook News Ban illustrates how far the balance between the two has shifted in recent decades: while in earlier times, news organisations were able to exercise their own intermediation role from the comparatively secure and independent environments of print, broadcast and stand-alone websites, the gradual and continuing shifts in access and engagement patterns that the annual Digital News Report, produced by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford and its country partners, has demonstrated for Australia and the world (cf. Newman et al., 2022; Park et al., 2021) mean that news audiences are increasingly encountering the news through social media platforms like Facebook – whether by choice, as followers of official accounts and pages, or by accident, serendipitously, as others in their personal networks are sharing news content that they find interesting (Purcell et al., 2010). As Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) have shown, for many news users this even results in a more diverse news diet, as social media users are exposed to a broader range of news sources than non-users – although, of course, especially in the context of major, unsettling crisis events like the COVID-19 pandemic this may also mean more fringe, problematic, ‘fake’ news content.

Today, at any rate, platforms like Facebook provide a crucial digital intermediation service for dedicated or prospective news audiences; while public and scholarly attention is more often directed to Twitter on this score, Facebook is just as important as an intermediary when it comes to the dissemination of news (Dewan & Kumaraguru, 2014). But – and this is the critical misunderstanding that underpinned the Australian government’s fatal overconfidence in introducing its News Media Bargaining Code – while Facebook may be an important source of news for many of its users (and indeed the main source of news for those who rarely seek out news updates through other channels; cf. Newman et al., 2015: 77), the opposite assumption does not hold: news is not a particularly important source of activity and engagement *for Facebook*, and this enabled it to take the drastic and extreme action of banning all news from the Australian Facebook without substantially affecting its own bottom line, or alienating the majority of its Australian userbase (beyond any pre-existing misgivings about Facebook’s generally questionable business practices that they may already have held).

This misunderstanding played out in the media for all to see, in fact: while, through the former chair of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), Rod Sims, the government noted the Digital News Report’s finding that ‘39% of Australians use Facebook for general news’ (Blackiston, 2020), Facebook’s Managing Director for Australia and New Zealand, Will Easton, shot back that

the ACCC presumes that Facebook benefits most in its relationship with publishers, when in fact the reverse is true. News represents a fraction of what people see in their News Feed and is not a significant source of revenue for us.

(Easton, 2020)

Indeed, while details on corporate revenue remain closely guarded secrets, our research at the time – ironically, using Facebook’s own data access tool, CrowdTangle – showed clearly that even at the height of the Facebook News Ban, the volume of overall posting and engagement patterns on public Australian Facebook pages remained essentially unchanged (Bruns & Angus, 2021). It’s handy to maintain an ‘ambient awareness’ (Hermida, 2010) of the news through the occasional updates you see popping up in your Facebook feed, but that’s not what the vast majority of Australian or indeed international users are on Facebook for. In other words, Facebook does serve as a digital intermediary between its content creators and its users, and – where those content creators are themselves news, media and other similar institutions – therefore also conducts a kind of second-order digital intermediation of these pre-existing digital intermediaries, but this isn’t its core business: its central function remains the digital intermediation between participants who are both users *and* content creators, or what I’ve called producers (Bruns, 2008).

Again, then, this points to the fact that some digital intermediaries are more powerful than others, and that Facebook, or indeed Meta – as the corporate ‘Big Tech’ behemoth that it has become – is more powerful than most. But amid the largely justified concern about this position of power, let us not ignore the fact that Facebook, Meta and all the other major players in this space aren’t monolithic structures that present a unified face to the world, or to their users. To begin with, the example of the Facebook News Ban also points us to the interplay between policies, technologies, institutions and individuals even just *within* Facebook itself: to ban all news from the Australian Facebook literally overnight is an action that involves all four. First, it needs someone (Mark Zuckerberg, or someone else in the senior leadership team) to decree that the nuclear option of banning all news from Facebook will be the platform’s policy if the threat of government regulation becomes acute. Having set that policy, it requires a determination of exactly what is news, and here the assumption has been that in preparing and implementing its news ban Facebook relied on a pre-existing categorisation of the institutional pages on the platform, and of the URLs posted to it, that may have been based on a mix of self-nomination by page administrators (selecting ‘News and Media’ as their page category from the available options), manual selection by Facebook staff (based on existing lists of the major Australian news outlets) and algorithmic categorisation (building on posting rhythms, engagement patterns or content keywords). This would also have explained the ban’s considerable overreach: the *Taste Magazine* page might have been emptied of content due to its categorisation as ‘News and Media’, or its use of the word ‘Magazine’; the Bureau of Meteorology and Health Department pages might have been affected because their content usually produces similar engagement patterns as conventional news.

In turn, this combination of selection attributes represents the conflagration of prior institutional choices at various levels of Facebook management:

somebody came up with the idea of a distinct content and engagement structuring device called ‘pages’, as separate from mere ‘profiles’; somebody proposed, developed and approved the various categories that administrators could choose for their pages (and the subsequent shift to more free-form, folksonomic selections); somebody commissioned, designed, implemented, tested and updated the algorithms that pick up on posting and engagement patterns and divide content on the platform into a variety of evolving categories that are given more or less visibility in a given user’s newsfeed, based on a matching between the new content and the user’s established patterns of identity, interest and engagement; somebody, in turn, opted – we assume – to use these various data points to select those pages in the Australian Facebook, and which domains being shared in it, that were to be considered sufficiently ‘newsy’ to warrant inclusion in the demonstration of digital intermediation power that the company conducted in response to the Australian government’s attempts to contain and channel that power. The point here is not so much to second-guess exactly how Facebook’s internal decision-making processes operate – although this has become a flourishing field of investigation in its own right that bears a striking resemblance to Cold War-era Kremlinology, including even its attempts to evaluate from a distance the current psychological state of the increasingly erratic chairman – but instead to note that there are internally and externally focussed digital intermediation processes occurring even within Facebook at every step of the path that led towards the Facebook News Ban, and indeed continue to take place with each further decision-making process within this complex and distributed organisation.

Finally, as it turns out, at least as far as the Facebook News Ban was concerned those decision-making processes were complicated even further by additional considerations. Even beyond the already extraordinary decision to ban all news from the Australian Facebook, we now understand from subsequent revelations by Facebook whistleblowers that the company *knowingly* chose to overreach in its removal of news and news-like content from the platform, with the explicit aim of setting a precedent that would act as a major deterrent to other governments considering similar legislation in their jurisdictions (Hagey et al., 2022). Having made its point, the company eventually relented: on the morning of 26 February 2021, more than a week after the ban began, news content finally returned to Australian Facebook pages and newsfeeds. The price for the recommencement of this digital intermediation function that the company extracted from the Australian government was that it would not be ‘designated’ under the News Media Bargaining Code, leaving it free to strike its own far more convenient bargains with a smaller selection of news organisations without the inconvenience of government supervision or public scrutiny (Purtill, 2021).

Overall, then, what we have here is the case of a crucial digital intermediary – and arguably, *the* most important digital intermediary in the contemporary mediasphere, matched in its intermediation power only by Google and a small

handful of other tech giants – deliberately sabotaging one aspect of its digital intermediation role: facilitating the dissemination of and engagement with the news. This is a role that may not be especially central to the company itself but is increasingly critical to the growing percentage of the population that receives its news first, and even *only*, from social media in general, and from Facebook in particular. Facebook’s – for now – temporary refusal to play that role was, of course, designed to demonstrate its power as a digital intermediary and to warn off national and regional regulators from messing with its unfettered ability to exercise that power. While this hubris might yet turn out to be its undoing (governments in Australia and elsewhere don’t especially like having their politics held to ransom, especially by upstart tech-bros from Silicon Valley), the case clearly demonstrates the high-stakes gamesmanship that the politics and the business of digital intermediation can involve.

Happily, not all digital intermediation processes involve such high stakes and extreme measures, and not all are as complicated by the extreme power imbalances that dealing with dominant market forces like Facebook or Google inevitably involves. The curious case of the Australian Facebook News Ban may show in a temporary microcosm many of the parts, patterns and processes that exist within the much larger space of digital intermediation in general, but it also represents a *particularly* fraught and dysfunctional example – as any clash between the self-importance of Australian politicians and the arrogance of Facebook’s leadership was always going to be. As the book you now hold in your hands (or see on your screen) amply demonstrates, digital intermediation can be constructive and productive, too.

Perhaps you will recognise some of the themes that have emerged in our brief tour through the Facebook News Ban and its key actors, though. In what follows, Jonathon Hutchinson presents a comprehensive and systematic framework for the study of digital intermediation in all of its forms, distinguishing the different layers of digital intermediation systems and processes by highlighting the roles of technologies, institutions, infrastructures, individuals and their intersection and interweaving in algorithmic intermediation processes that depend on crucial inputs from all those layers. His focus on the roles of public service media – or, more broadly, public cultural institutions – as both partners in and alternatives to corporate models of digital intermediation is especially critical at a time when (as the Facebook News Ban also shows) we should be seriously concerned about the power of platforms, and of their idiosyncratic leaders, but when at the same time we cannot simply walk away from these digital spaces that are now, for better or for worse, so central to the way that we live our lives every day.

Importantly, in addressing the role of public service media, Jonathon Hutchinson also highlights their educational function – a function they share with our own academic scholarship. As he argues, they, and we, must continue to agitate for a far greater level of transparency about the operations of digital intermediaries. This applies, on the one hand, to the corporate operations of

such organisations: for example, we cannot continue to wait for the occasional whistleblower alone to reveal exactly what led to severely impactful corporate decisions like the Facebook News Ban, what produced the dodgy arrangement between Facebook and the Australian government that allowed policymakers to save some face by pointing to Facebook's eventual willingness to strike deals with selected news outlets, and what those deals entail. There is a need to insist on and enforce much greater transparency in order to enable journalism and scholarship, possibly in collaboration, to act in the service of the public and to inform and educate them about the productive or problematic role that powerful digital intermediaries now play in our social, cultural, commercial and political lives.

On the other hand, this need for greater transparency also applies to the data that these digital intermediaries generate about us and that we generate in the course of our engagement with them. Here, we reached a crisis point in the wake of the 2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal, when Facebook and other platforms severely curtailed access to data about the patterns and processes of communication that their digital platforms served to intermediate – supposedly to better protect user privacy, but primarily in order to evade further scrutiny by independent, scholarly, public-interest researchers (Bruns, 2019). At the time of writing in late 2022, the pendulum might be swinging the other way again: especially with the passing of the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), which requires the provision of access to platform data for research purposes, several platforms (Twitter, YouTube, TikTok) have either opened, enhanced or promised new application programming interfaces (the frameworks through which analysts access platform data) that are designed explicitly for scholarly research. Facebook's parent company Meta, notably, has yet to respond in any practical and constructive way to the DSA – and given its position as the operator of several leading international social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp), and the severely limited or even entirely non-existent access to data about the patterns of communication that take place across these crucial platforms that researchers currently have, the need for more transparency is perhaps the most pronounced here. We cannot sufficiently document, evaluate and educate the general public as well as policymakers and other key stakeholders about the roles that digital intermediaries play in the contemporary mediasphere if these platforms remain largely uncharted territory – and as long as we suffer from such severe limitations to our knowledge, they will continue to lead to such ill-conceived and poorly executed regulatory interventions in digital intermediation processes as the News Media Bargaining Code has turned out to be.

Again, this isn't about Facebook alone. But Facebook, in all its vainglory, remains a central cautionary tale that shows what digital intermediation can turn into if it remains poorly understood and insufficiently scrutinised. I for one am relieved that Jonathon Hutchinson is here to help us develop a more systematic understanding of digital intermediation in all of its forms and that he is

prompting us to ask all the right questions. And after reading this book, I'm sure you will be too.

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