

# Digital platforms and neoliberal rationality: reconfigurations of power in contemporary social fields

## Abstract

Digital platforms have transformed social relations, reconfigured power structures, and reshaped economic and educational practices. This article uses grounded theory as its research design to review how the dynamics of the digital platform economy intersect with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social fields and symbolic power, Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, and Nick Srnicek's critique of platform capitalism. Through curated bibliographic perspective of qualitative analysis, three dimensions emerged: (i) the reproduction of power in digital fields, (ii) the construction of digital hegemony in the context of neoliberalism, and (iii) the role of data extraction and algorithmic governance as mechanisms of domination and commodification. The study consequently argues that digital platforms operate almost simultaneously as economic infrastructures as well as ideological apparatuses, to reinforce the notion of a neoliberal logic that is redefining the forms of social control and power dynamics on digital platforms.

**Keywords:** social field, symbolic power, digital platforms, hegemony, neoliberalism, platform capitalism

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## Introduction

The acceleration of digitalization in recent decades has profoundly transformed the mode of production, circulation, and legitimization of knowledge, social participation, and economic relations. Digital platforms such as Google, Meta, Amazon, Coursera, and others have become central infrastructures that mediate interactions between individuals, institutions, and markets. These transformations demand analytical frameworks capable of understanding the sociopolitical and economic dynamics that shape the platform society.

Pierre Bourdieu<sup>1,2</sup> offers a potent lens for analyzing these transformations by conceptualizing society as a constellation of fields structured by unequal distributions of capital – economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Social agents position themselves and compete within these fields, while power relations are reproduced through habitus and symbolic domination.

Antonio Gramsci,<sup>3</sup> by theorizing hegemony and the role of civil society, helps illuminate how platforms produce consent, shape subjectivities, and naturalize neoliberal values. Digital infrastructures do not merely organize information; they operate as pedagogical devices that educate, mold, and normalize behaviors aligned with capitalist market rationalities.

Nick Srnicek,<sup>4</sup> in turn, theorizes platform capitalism as a novel economic stage characterized by data extraction, network effects, and monopolistic control. Platforms become engines of accumulation by turning human activity into raw material, intensifying surveillance and commodifying social interactions.

The expansion of digital platforms has intensified the convergence between economic rationality, technological mediation, and symbolic power, producing new configurations of domination that are not fully explained by isolated theoretical approaches. While the literature on digital platforms has advanced important critiques of data extraction, surveillance, and market concentration, there remains a gap in

integrative analyses capable of articulating economic, political, and symbolic dimensions within a unified theoretical framework.

This article is grounded in the problem that digital platforms operate simultaneously as economic infrastructures and ideological apparatuses, shaping social practices, subjectivities, and power relations under neoliberal rationality. The lack of dialogue between sociological theories of power (Bourdieu), political theories of hegemony (Gramsci), and critical political economy of platforms (Srnicek) limits the analytical potential to fully understand the depth of these transformations. This convergence of forces constitutes the basis for the aim of the present study.

This article therefore aims to articulate these three theoretical perspectives to analyze how digital platforms shape contemporary social dynamics, reinforce neoliberal ideology, and reorganize power structures within the digital field.

## Methodology

This study adopts grounded theory as the research methodology and uses a bibliographic textual analysis to review works from Sociology, Political Theory, and Digital Economy. The analysis focuses on:

- Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, habitus, and symbolic power;
- Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and the role of civil society;
- Nick Srnicek's critique of platform capitalism;
- Contemporary literature on digital governance, ratification, and algorithmic power.

Sources were selected according to thematic relevance and theoretical consistency. The analytical process involved thematic categorization, cross-reading of theoretical frameworks, and synthesis aimed at identifying convergences and tensions.

## Results

### The analysis identified three central dimensions

1. Digital platforms as social fields structured by unequal capitals  
Platforms behave as fields in Bourdieu's sense: they establish rules of participation (algorithms, metrics, engagement parameters); they define what counts as legitimate capital (visibility, engagement, data production); they reproduce inequalities by favoring agents with preexisting social, economic, or cultural capital.

Symbolic power manifests in the naturalization of algorithmic norms and the belief in platform neutrality.

2. Neoliberal hegemony and digital governance

Drawing on Gramsci, platforms function as hegemonic apparatuses that shape cultural and ideological norms: they normalize competition, meritocracy, and entrepreneurial self-management; they present neoliberal rationalities as common sense; they shape user behavior through soft coercion (nudges, design choices, reward systems).

The result is a digital hegemony that fuses market logic, technological determinism, and self-surveillance.

3. Digital hegemony as a hybrid regime of power

The consolidation of digital hegemony represents the synthesis of economic, technological, and symbolic forms of power. This configuration fuses market logic, technological determinism, and self-surveillance into a coherent regime that governs social participation on digital platforms.

Within this regime, users are simultaneously consumers, producers of data, and objects of algorithmic evaluation. Neoliberal rationality is internalized through metrics of performance, visibility, and engagement, transforming autonomy into a form of self-regulation. Digital hegemony thus operates not through direct coercion, but through the normalization of competition, constant monitoring, and the moralization of productivity.

4. Platform capitalism as a regime of data extraction and control

Srnicek's framework highlights that: data is the central commodity; surveillance and algorithmic prediction drive profit; platforms impose dependency structures on users, institutions, and even states.

Education is particularly affected: learning becomes data, behavior becomes product, and pedagogical processes become automated and commercialized.

## Discussion

The integrated analysis of the theoretical perspectives examined in this article demonstrates that digital platforms constitute complex sociopolitical structures whose operations extend far beyond the technological domain. Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptualization of fields<sup>1</sup> and symbolic power,<sup>2</sup> platforms can be interpreted as digital arenas where agents compete for visibility, authority, and legitimacy based on unequal distributions of capital. The algorithmic hierarchies that determine which content becomes visible replicate what Bourdieu and Wacquant describe as the reproductive mechanisms of social domination within structured spaces.<sup>5</sup> The apparent neutrality of algorithmic curation strengthens the processes of misrecognition that naturalize inequalities within digital environments.

This dynamic intertwines with the formation of neoliberal hegemony, in line with Gramsci's reflections on ideological leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Through design choices, engagement metrics, and personalization systems, platforms disseminate values associated with entrepreneurial subjectivity, individual responsibility, and competitive performance. These mechanisms contribute to what scholars such as Couldry and Mejías describe as the "data colonialism" that reorganizes social life around extraction and appropriation.<sup>6</sup> Such processes resonate strongly with Gramsci's thesis that hegemony operates by shaping common sense rather than relying on explicit coercion. As a result, digital interactions increasingly normalize neoliberal rationality and mold subjects into self-monitoring and self-optimizing agents.

From an economic standpoint, Srnicek's theorization of platform capitalism is central to understanding how platforms have become infrastructures of large-scale data extraction.<sup>4</sup> The conversion of human behavior into raw material for predictive analytics and algorithmic governance reflects the emergence of a new mode of accumulation. Complementing this perspective, Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism relies on the continuous appropriation of behavioral surplus to generate profits and influence user conduct.<sup>7</sup> Both authors highlight that platform power operates not only through economic mechanisms but also through architectures of monitoring and behavioral modulation.

These dynamics connect with broader debates about the political implications of digital infrastructures. Selwyn's critique emphasizes that educational and social technologies are embedded in ideological and economic projects that often reinforce privatization, managerialism, and market-driven governance.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Morozov contends that Big Tech's political influence expands as digital infrastructures position themselves as essential and irreplaceable, thereby shaping public policy and undermining democratic processes.<sup>9</sup> Integrating these insights reinforces the argument that platforms exercise a form of infrastructural and ideological power that is simultaneously economic, symbolic, and political.

Taken together, these contributions reveal that platforms operate as digital fields structured by unequal capitals,<sup>1,5</sup> as hegemonic cultural devices that naturalize neoliberal rationality,<sup>3</sup> and as extractive infrastructures that commodify human activity.<sup>4,6,7</sup> Moreover, they embody the political and ideological influence highlighted by Selwyn<sup>8</sup> and Morozov,<sup>9</sup> demonstrating that digital architectures have become central to the maintenance and expansion of neoliberal governance. This intersectionality produces a new configuration of domination that permeates everyday life, shaping habits, expectations, and modes of participation. Understanding these intertwined processes is essential for critically assessing the role of platforms in contemporary society and for developing strategies capable of resisting their concentration of power.

## Implications of digital politics

The findings of this study indicate that digital platforms have become central political actors in contemporary society, exercising power through infrastructural control, data governance, and symbolic mediation. The convergence of sociological, political, and economic theories reveals that platform power transcends market dynamics and reshapes democratic processes, public discourse, and institutional autonomy.

Digital platforms influence policy agendas, redefine the boundaries between public and private spheres, and consolidate forms of governance that operate through algorithms rather than formal political institutions. This transformation reconfigures early notions of neoliberal rationality, shifting from deregulation and minimal state intervention toward a model of algorithmic regulation dominated by private corporations.

Understanding these implications is crucial for developing critical responses capable of defending democratic values, social rights, and the public dimension of education and knowledge in a platformized society.

## Conclusion

The intersection of Bourdieu's theory of fields, Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and Srnicek's analysis of platform capitalism allows for a comprehensive understanding of digital platforms as structures of power, domination, and ideological production.

It is concluded that:

Platforms operate as digital fields, reproducing inequalities and legitimizing specific forms of capital.

Neoliberal hegemony is reinforced through platform-mediated socialization, which promotes competitiveness, self-entrepreneurship, and constant visibility.

Data extraction constitutes the core of the platform economy, generating new forms of economic exploitation and symbolic control.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to confront inequalities, democratize digital participation, and defend the public dimension of knowledge in the age of platformization.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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