Deconstructing the platform
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Platforms are frequently central to definitions of the sharing economy, and feature in discussions of digitalisation of economy more broadly. The question of the platform itself though, is often left unproblematised in such accounts, so that far from being clearly defined, "platform" tends to operate as what Tarleton Gillespie (2010) called "a discursive resting point", upon which a variety of other claims can be made. Gillespie noted that this discursive positioning produced sufficient specificity to mean something, but simultaneously was vague enough to take on a sense across different sectors and audiences.

In thinking of the platform as a discursive formation, Gillespie showed how addressing a question of definition does not necessarily imply narrowing down but instead can open an inquiry that seeks to proliferate, considering how definitions differ and function differently in a variety contexts. This is then a "deconstructive" approach, emphasising the inconsistencies of meaning, and seeking to show how these always exist in relation to their particular realm of use, thus raising the issue of what the adoption of the term "platform" allows for those using it.

Extending this discursive approach, is an inquiry that could be termed genealogical in that it traces the historical emergence of disparate sets of practices that constitute the contemporary problem of the platform. For whilst the platform certainly denotes a change constituting a contemporary socio-economic condition, this is in no way part of any linear scheme of progressive history. Instead, it is possible to trace multiple historical turns that show that the platform is by no means a fixed descriptor for a singular set of actions.

The story of emergence traced in my lecture at the IWSE was one that focused on organizations and their changing technologies, examining literature from organization science and sociology, together with Computer Supported Collaborative Work. Organizations are a useful – but by no means the only – realm for understanding how platforms have developed. This is because platforms appear both as bounded organizations (or companies) and as processes of organization beyond the bounds of a given company.

So most obviously, companies from Uber to Google are referred to as platforms, although even this is not necessarily straightforward, as it is not always clear whether this refers to the structure of the organization or to what the organization does or both. Because for example, the platform is also understood as a business model that is central to enacting a digital transformation, so Google might be a platform but it might also have a platform.

However, platforms also necessarily exist as sets of processes that extend beyond a company, in other words decentralising some of their characteristics and distributing agency. This is noted eloquently by Anne Helmond in her discussion of the "platformization" of the web, in which she describes processes through which social media platforms extend into other spaces online. For example, Helmond sets out how platform content and features are "modularised", so that they can be used elsewhere on the web beyond "the platform itself", extending and distributing the platform across different web spaces.

It is this tension then, between the platform as organization and the platform as process of organizing that can be explored through a genealogical approach, so that the purpose is not to define the platform as either an organization *or* a mode of organizing, but instead to understand

how these two elements co-exist in contemporary understandings of platforms. It is possible to see the emergence of structural contingencies informing the contemporary problem of platform organization that arose through attempts to approach the role of technologies in organizations in the 1980s and 1990s. Personal computers meant a shift away from an understanding of technology as purely structuring or determining agents within organizations, towards a sense of their possibilities to distribute agency and potentially undermine organizational boundaries.

As argued in the lecture, what this implies in relation to questions concerning sharing economies is that platforms are not necessarily attributable to a give type of economic activity. Through particular genealogies of the platform it is possible to see that the form itself does not necessarily connote, for example, any particular type of exchange. As with all technologies and structuring devices, it is necessary to understand their operations and constitution *in situ*, which seems particularly crucial here, given the deliberate contingency to the structure of platforms.