

Interrogating Digital Platforms

Theme Week, Aarhus University

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Instructor

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Description

This theme week is designed to provide an overview of aspects to consider in the interrogation and analysis of digital platforms. It aims to equip students with a method and multiple techniques for analysing platforms. It will also enable students to become acquainted with the latest research and theories pertaining to platforms. Lectures focus on different aspects of platforms that are analysed using the “walkthrough method” (Light, Burgess, and Duguay, 2016), including the platform’s vision, operating model, governance, and technical interface. We will also discuss user agency, technological appropriation, and touch on the performance of identity through platforms. Perspectives will draw on literature from platform studies, science and technology studies as well as media and cultural studies.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the week, students will be able to:

- Draw on relevant literature related to analysing platform affordances, economies, governance, and appropriation;
- Conduct the walkthrough method for analysing platforms and apps, through individual analysis and in an interview setting;
- Critically analyse and compare platforms;
- Reflect on their own use of platforms, especially their compliance with, resistance to, and experience of platform interfaces.

Format

This mini-course consists of discussions, group activities, reflections, and lectures. We will start each morning with a discussion and then move into a lecture. The lectures throughout this week are designed to spark further discussion while providing techniques, resources, and analytical lenses for application during group activities. One reading will be assigned for each topic, which will provide background for discussions.

Key Activities:

1. Comparative App Analysis

On the first day, you will form groups and choose two apps from the same genre (e.g., health, music, social networking) to analyse using the walkthrough method. Important: You must be a regular user of at least one of the apps your group is analysing.

After lectures, you will get a chance to work as a group and conduct the part of the walkthrough method that we discussed in the lecture. You will be working to produce a presentation for Friday.

Group Presentation – 30 minutes, followed by 10 minutes for Q&A

- Provide an overview of walkthrough findings for each app (15 min)
- Identify three key points of comparison between the apps (10 min)
- Pitch a research paper that you could write based on your findings (5 min)

2. Platform interviews

On Thursday, you will use techniques from the walkthrough method to interview another classmate about their use of a platform.

- Following the lecture about interviewing, you will draft interview questions based on your current findings from the comparative app analysis
- Find one student who uses the app for which you have developed interview questions
- Interview this student for 30-40 minutes
- Switch pairs and roles so that you are interviewed about your platform use

Interviews can be recorded for use in your media tracking project.

Schedule

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9:00am - 10:15am	Intro and housekeeping Conceptualising platforms	Discuss/review yesterday's content Platform economies	Discuss/review yesterday's content Examining platform interfaces	Discuss/review yesterday's content Interviews and platform analysis	Group presentations Q&A
10:15am - 10:30am	Break (10:15 - 10:30)				
10:30am - 12:00pm	Intro to walkthrough method Form groups and choose apps for comparative analysis	Platform economies (continued) Group activity: Determine your platforms' operating model	Technical walkthrough Group activity: Conduct a technical walkthrough for each app	Draft interview questions Activity: Interview another student about their platform use	Group presentations Q&A
12:00pm - 1:00pm	Lunch (12:00 - 1:00)				
1:00pm - 3:00pm	Platform visions Group activity: Establish your platforms' vision and market niche	Platform governance Group activity: Explore your platforms' governance structure	User agency and resistance Group activity: Continue technical walkthrough and identify forms of user resistance to your apps QTC: "The 'lesbianing' thing": Queer women's participation and representation on digital platforms	Discuss interview experiences Group presentation preparation	Group presentations Q&A Wrap up

Topics

1. Conceptualising platforms & Intro to walkthrough method

What is a platform? While we think the answer is straightforward, it really isn't! We will discuss how concepts of platforms (and apps) have changed over time. We will review different ways of studying platforms and examine why this is difficult. An overview of the walkthrough method will be provided so that you can understand how each aspect of analysis works together to generate a body of data about a platform.

Group activity: Form groups for the Comparative App Analysis – pick two apps from the same genre (e.g., food, education, medicine, shopping) that you will analyse throughout the week using the walkthrough method.

Required reading:

Light, B., Burgess, J., & Duguay, S. (2016). The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. *New Media & Society*, 1–20. doi.10.1177/1461444816675438

2. Platform visions

Most platforms are developed with intended uses and anticipated user groups. We will discuss the multiple actors involved in platform design and development and examine how to identify a platform's vision.

Group activity: Establish the vision held by each of your apps. You will need to look at the apps' websites, app store descriptions, press releases, social media pages, etc.

Answer the questions:

- Who is this app marketed to?
- Who is excluded from this marketing?
- Is there anyone who *should* not use this app? Or, is there anyone who would have difficulty using the app?
- How do the app developers expect that it will be used?

Optional reading:

Hoffmann, A. L., Proferes, N., & Zimmer, M. (2016). "Making the world more open and connected": Mark Zuckerberg and the discursive construction of Facebook and its users. *New Media & Society*, 1–20. doi.10.1177/1461444816660784

Related website: <https://www.zuckerbergfiles.org/>

3. Platform economies

Platforms must receive funding or generate revenue in order to sustain their operation. For commercial platforms, revenue generation can involve investors, targeted advertising, as well as data mining and reselling. Platforms can also host and participate in complex economies with users and third parties, such as Facebook's in-app games or YouTube's revenue sharing agreements with popular users. We will discuss these complexities and ways of identifying a platform's operating model as part of the walkthrough method.

Group activity: Determine your apps' operating model. You will need to look at subscription or "Premium" account options, records of investments and acquisitions, trade press articles and other sources of information. Answer the questions:

- Who owns this app?
- How does the app make money?
 - Is there a paid version? What is the appeal of this version?
 - Are there in-app advertisements?
 - Does the app have investors?
 - What happens to user data?

Required reading:

Nieborg, D. B. (2015). Crushing Candy The Free-to-Play Game. *Social Media + Society*. doi.10.1177/2056305115621932 Available open source: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305115621932>

4. Platform governance

There are external governing forces (e.g., national laws) that influence platforms while platforms also govern the activity of their users. We will discuss governance issues that platforms deal with, such as hate speech, harassment, and nudity. We will also examine the different mechanisms through which platforms govern and regulate user behaviour, including policies, moderators, and algorithms.

Group activity: Explore your apps' governance structures. You will need to look at community guidelines, terms and conditions, in-app flagging and reporting functions, etc. Answer the questions:

- What is prohibited on this app? Why?
- How does this app regulate user activity?
- What happens when users violate the app's policies?

Required reading:

Gillespie, T. (forthcoming). Governance of and by platforms. In J. Burgess, T. Poell, & A. Marwick (Eds.), *SAGE Handbook of Social Media*. Available open source: <http://culturedigitally.org/2016/06/governance-of-and-by-platforms/>

5. Examining platform interfaces & the technical walkthrough

There are many ways to examine a platform's features, functions, aesthetics, and interactivity. We will discuss key concepts for analysing user interfaces, such as 'mediators.' Then we will focus on the technical component of the walkthrough method, which involves step-by-step analysis of app registration, everyday use, and discontinuation of use. This part of the walkthrough often uncovers aspects of the app's vision, operating model, and governance that are embedded in its architecture.

Group activity: Conduct a technical walkthrough of each app. Start with registration by making a new account and work your way through everyday use and account deletion. Pay attention to detail along the way:

- What do profile fields say about anticipated users?
- Are the app's icons, avatars, or images based on any assumptions or stereotypes?

- Does the app guide users to particular functions or features? (e.g., connecting with Facebook or other partners)

Record field notes and screenshots to compile your walkthrough data in a central document for further analysis.

Required reading:

Duguay, S. (2016). LGBTQ visibility through selfies: Comparing platform mediators across Ruby Rose's Instagram and Vine presence. *Social Media + Society*, 2(2), 1–12. doi.10.1177/2056305116641975 Available open source: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2056305116641975>

Optional reading:

Bucher, T., & Helmond, A. (2017). The affordances of social media platforms. In J. Burgess, T. Poell, & A. Marwick (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Social Media*. London and New York: Sage. Available open source: <http://www.annhelmond.nl/2016/08/01/the-affordances-of-social-media-platforms/>

6. User agency and resistance

The walkthrough method focuses on how platforms guide users. However, users have agency in whether they adopt a technology and how they use it. We will discuss theories of user resistance and appropriation. We will then apply these theories in relation to platforms.

Group activity: Look for forms of user resistance and appropriation in relation to your apps. You will need to examine critiques of your apps, social media discussions, etc. Answer the questions:

- What do users dislike about this app?
- How are users resisting this app?
- For what purposes are users appropriating this app?

Note: You can also use this time to complete your technical walkthroughs if you are not yet finished.

Optional reading:

Eglash, R. (2004). Appropriating technology: An introduction. In R. Eglash, J. L. Croissant, G. D. Chiro, & R. Fouche (Eds.), *Appropriating technology: Vernacular science and social power* (pp. vii–xxi). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Available open source: <http://homepages.rpi.edu/~eglash/eglash.dir/at/intro.pdf>

7. Interviews and platform analysis

One way to extend the walkthrough method so that it considers users and their agency is to integrate it with interview methods. We will discuss various methodological approaches to examining users' experiences of platforms. Then we will look at how to repurpose walkthrough findings into an interview format.

Activity: Choose one of your apps and draft interview questions based on your walkthrough findings. Then pair up with another student in the class who uses the app you have analysed. Interview the student for 30 minutes or until you have covered all your questions. Switch and become the interviewee.

Optional reading:

Jørgensen, K. M. (2016). The media go-along: Researching mobilities with media at hand. *Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 60, 32–49. Available open source: <https://tidsskrift.dk/mediekultur/article/view/22429/20840>

Bonus!! QTC Wednesday Talk at 2:00pm (I hear there will be cake)

“The ‘lesbianing’ thing”: Queer women’s participation and representation on digital platforms

In this presentation, I will discuss findings from my study of queer women’s participation and representation on contemporary social media platforms. I combined traditional and digital research methods to analyse queer women’s use of: Tinder, a platform for dating and meeting people; Instagram, a platform for photo sharing; and Vine, a platform for sharing short, looping videos. My analysis of platforms, user content, and user interviews showed platform-specific forms of participation and representation as well as a common set of practices. I understand these practices as ‘identity modulation’ – continuous decision-making about whether and how much to make sexual identity recognisable in relation to other personally identifying information (e.g., name, location, face) for particular social media audiences. The term invokes the analogy of adjusting device settings, such as volume or brightness, as variables that can be altered by the user but are subject to the affordances and constraints of the available controls. Queer women engaged in identity modulation on Tinder to find partners, on Instagram to create their personal brand, and on Vine to form close-knit communities. Across platforms, identity modulation enabled queer women to participate in networked publics. However, individuals also encountered impediments to identity modulation, such as embedded platform biases and discriminatory user practices. I wish to share these findings to spark a discussion of avenues for future research relating to sexuality and digital media.