

Educational Module

Behind Digital Platforms

Thematic Unit 1 – Platforms, platform capitalism, tools, implications.



Digital platforms in our lives: present and future

- 📄 **Digital platform:** a hardware or software infrastructure that provides services and technological tools, programs and applications for the distribution, management and creation of digital content and services, free or paid, also through the integration of multiple media (integrated digital platform).

Digital platforms of various kinds are constantly present in our daily lives (Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Amazon, Airbnb, ChatGPT, etc.) for many purposes. They are useful, convenient, fast – we cannot do without them. So much so that we no longer even notice what we do online and what we do offline.

We all see messages like these, and perhaps some of us are even intrigued by them:



"Make it big with a brilliant idea and earn loads of money"



Become a real influencer and make money quickly and easily



Invent a new online business



Create a new app

But where does this idea of making tons of money starting from scratch come from, and how is it possible?

ARCHETYPE

arché "original principle" and *typos* "model"



Microsoft



Google



Amazon



Facebook



Airbnb

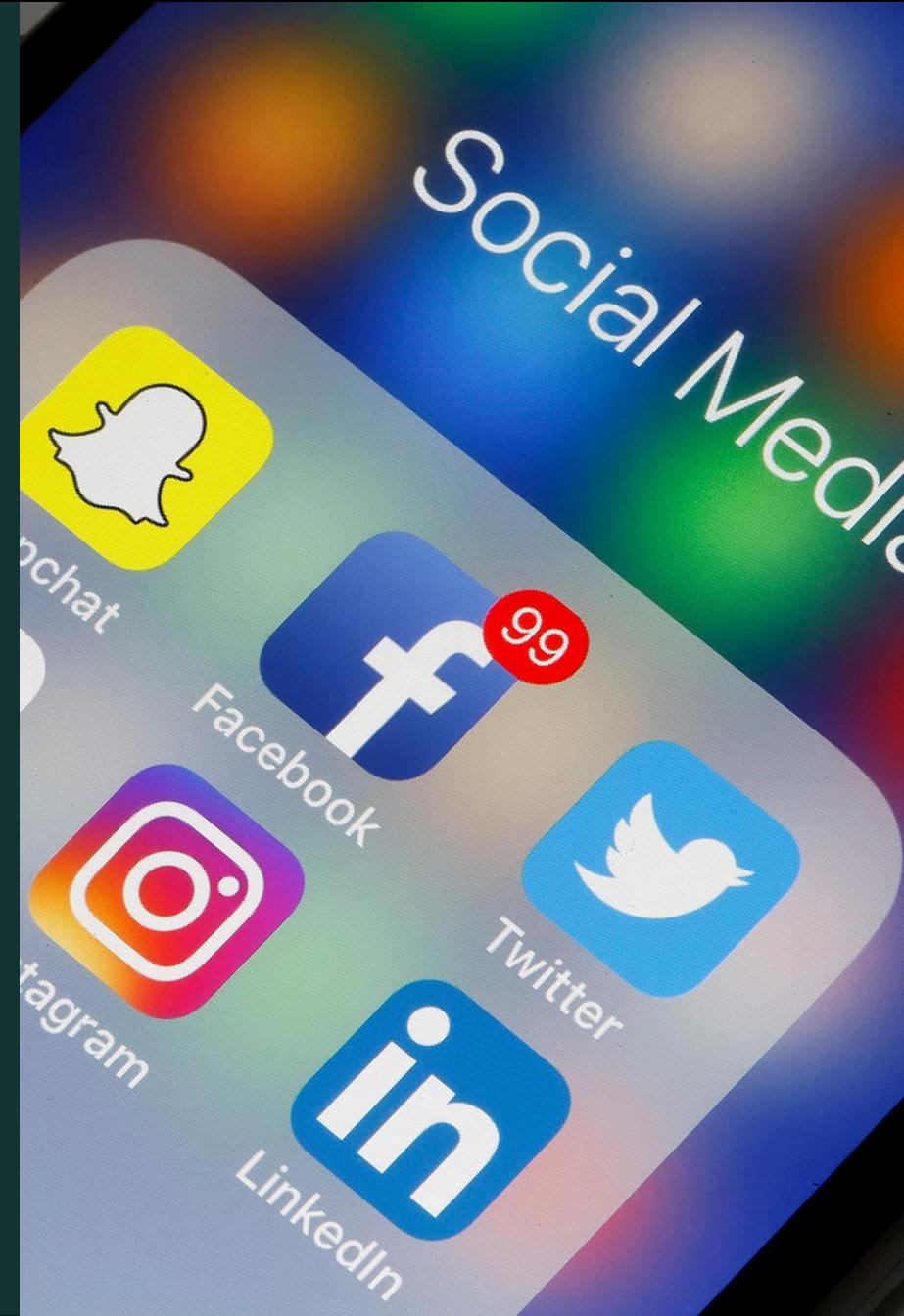


Apple

In each of these places, people conceived and realized an idea that changed their lives.

They invented something that didn't yet exist, but that everyone would have wanted — or needed — to use.

All interesting "products," yet in reality almost none of them is a true product.



What is a platform?



**These, for example...
They are tangible
products.**



Platforms provide services, not products

The digital platforms we are talking about are not products, but provide services of all kinds. Sometimes they are also used to obtain products, for example if we order items on Amazon.

Without such efficient and convenient services, we can no longer even imagine a single day of our lives.

From citizens to digital citizens

Digital platforms, blending into every one of our daily activities (study, work, friends, relationships, shopping, entertainment, information, politics, finance), effectively make us no longer just citizens, but digital citizens acting in a context that is no longer only political-social (living in a community with shared rules and rights) but also technological (living in a community that "exists" through digital platforms with specific rules and rights, to be redefined).



What makes all this possible?

What lies beneath the visible surface of what appears to us?

What is platform capitalism?

- A new economic landscape where data and algorithms, mediated by new technologies and strengthened by AI, regulate our lives, making them more efficient and generating profit.

At the dawn of the third millennium (the 2000s), in the territories of the global metropolis, the era of platform capitalism began.



The overwhelming power of platforms

Doubts about the overwhelming economic and financial power (therefore also political, informational and "cultural") of platforms and of the form of capitalism that characterizes them?

Today

Only **2 of the 10** highest-capitalization companies in the world are **not** directly connected to digital platforms or the hi-tech sector.

20 Years Ago

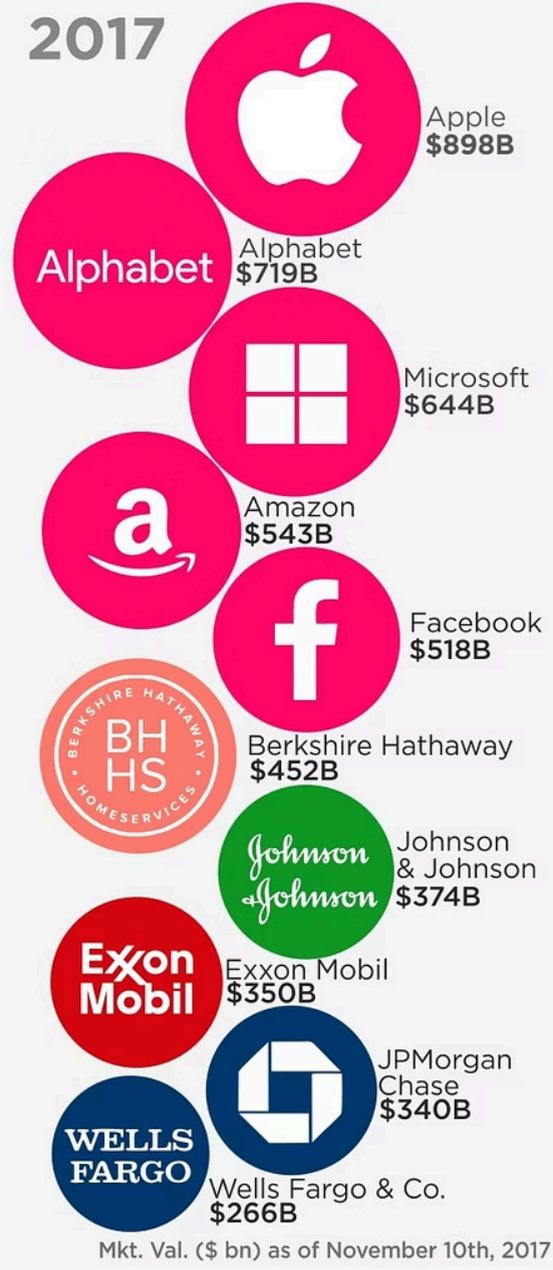
It was the **opposite**.

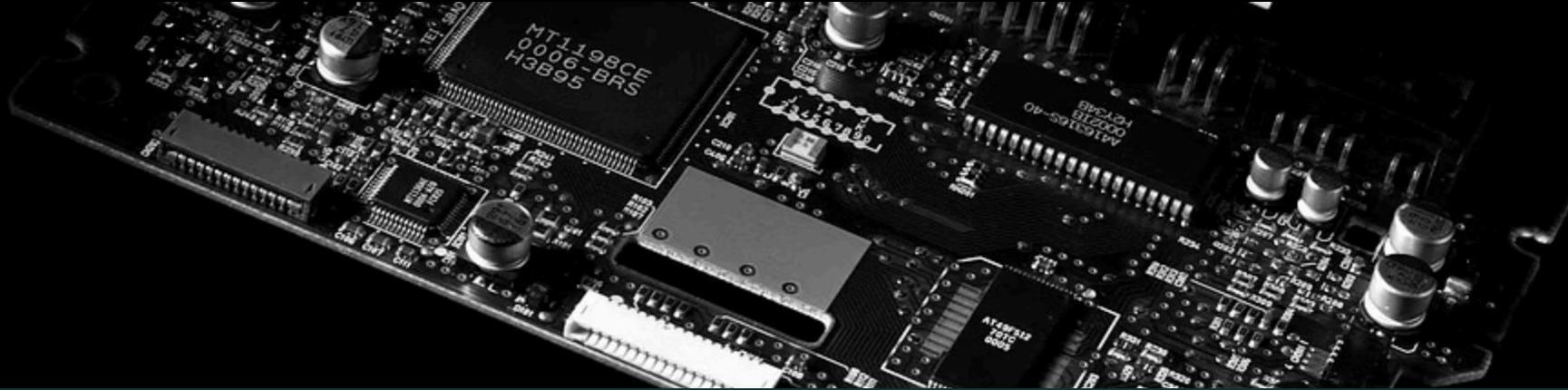
The major corporations of our time generate profit starting from data.

We are in the age of digital platforms and hi-tech companies; these tables leave no doubt.

Here is how the Top 10 US multinationals have changed every 50 years over the course of a century.

100 Years of America's Top 10 Companies





Platform Capitalism

Platform capitalism provides a model in which, in real time, producers, sellers and buyers come into contact, facilitating exchanges and generating revenue.

It is a hi-tech economic model where innovative companies create digital platforms or online infrastructures.

Disrupting Every Sector

These platforms (for example Airbnb, Facebook, Shein, JustEat, Microsoft, Alibaba, Temu or Amazon) are tools of technological innovation that have disrupted the service sector. They are based on algorithms and data analysis to match supply and demand and to create new markets (and new needs we did not know we had).

Their impact is enormous. On the one hand, they have established themselves as central to the contemporary production system, setting new standards and creating new production relationships for every sector. On the other hand, they are **transforming the way we live**.

The pros of platform capitalism



Efficiency

Technological innovation increases efficiency in various sectors



Direct Contact

Direct contact is established between producers and buyers (fewer intermediaries, lower costs)



Data Collection

Continuous data collection (for example on purchasing behavior, political opinions, cultural interests and shared content) can be used to personalize offers, present targeted advertising and generate value



Time Saved

Time is saved by researching and purchasing from the comfort of one's home



Products Find You

Products end up finding you



Lower Costs

The costs of products and services for the buyer decrease significantly

At this point I believe you are all asking yourselves a question:

"But what do digital platforms have to do with this school subject?" "Isn't this a subject that deals with concrete, real things?"

Not exactly. The human and social sciences study the processes that determine who we are, how we think and the territories in which we live — and platforms are **decisive for us, for the spaces and times we inhabit, for our present and our future.**

A New Productive Space

First of all, digital platforms, technological tools that exploit internet infrastructure, have created a new productive space that is at the same time **physical and virtual, individual and collective, political and social.**

"THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS," RAPHAEL, VATICAN MUSEUMS.





Modifying Our Territories

Secondly, platforms are modifying our territories and the way we experience them.

We can no longer even conceive of a world without platforms.
Do you think that's an exaggeration?

A classroom experiment

Would you give up the internet for 5 million euros?

One day, while I was explaining the globalization of the economy in one of my classes, I asked the following very simple question:

"Would you permanently give up the possibility of always being connected to the internet wherever you want for 5 million euros?"

Would you give up:

Instagram?

TikTok?

Telegram?

Spotify?

WhatsApp?

YouTube?

Brawl Stars?

You can try to tell me yes, but personally **I couldn't do it** – and probably no one else in this classroom could either.

But is this the only way platforms have changed our lives?

By offering us, at zero cost, a wealth of services that allow us to enjoy benefits that were once expensive or often even non-existent?

Not only that. In the face of many "pros," we must ask ourselves whether and where the possible **"cons"** of this wave of advantages and well-being have been offloaded. It will be appropriate to investigate possible **shadow areas**.



Further Study

Bibliographic / Web References – UT 1



Online Article

[Niccolò Cuppini, *The dark sides of the algorithmic city* \(2022\).](#)



Book

N. Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Rome, Luiss University Press, 2017



Video

[L. Floridi, *Onlife - Opportunities and risks of platforms*](#)