Article

From Traffic to Value: Balancing Ethics and Commercialization in Digital Media Platforms

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Abstract: This study addresses the enduring conflict of digital media platforms regarding their societal worth versus commercial requirements, suggesting a shift from traffic-driven models to value-driven ones. The current media environment evolves towards systems of attention commodification, where engagement and interaction are prioritised over content quality and social value. The analysis shows how the traffic paradigm creates a self-sustaining system that diminishes substantive value creation and prioritises value-destroying attention capture strategies. This model of commercialisation causes challenges that go far beyond what traditional regulatory approaches can solve—these require novel governance innovations. This study focuses on emerging governance innovations such as coregulation, multilevel governance, algorithmic accountability, and new data stewardship frameworks. The proposed value-centric platform economics shifts the paradigm for defining success from engagement metrics toward redefined societal benefits, aligning financial goals with social good and enabling more legitimate governance. This change demands an integrated shift in regulatory frameworks, platform design, commercial strategies, and governance systems towards building sustainable digital media ecosystems that balance public interest with market forces.

1. Introduction

In recent years, transitions in the structure of the underlying infrastructure of digital media have resulted in new forms of platform economies which change the

manner in which content is created, distributed, and monetised. This new shift opens up a host of tensions between ethical and commercial issues. This is particularly the case as the commoditisation of technology and digital media is based on the capture of attention, data, and interaction from users. Conceptually, there seems to be profound discrepancies between digital media profit maximisation and traditional media journalistic standards [1], illustrating a deep gap between socio-economic motives and media-driven morality. A similar scenario arises where privacy, societal interactions, and the quality of information provided are put into dispensable balance as platform-based social media technologies utilise sophisticated algorithms targeting audience attention [2].

The emergence of digital media platforms has accelerated the dissemination of misinformation, recognised as one of the most critical problems in the current environment. There is increasing recognition of these approaches to information disorders that require systemic change on a more structural level, highlighting the need to address some sort of market failure [3]. At the same time, the incorporation of generative AI content tools creates new blurred "synthetic" frontiers about what is authentic or inauthentic which creates new avenues for innovation as well as profound ethical dilemmas [4]. It is safe to say that the impact of AI transcends content creation, fundamentally changing how attempts at marketing and audience engagement are undertaken [5]. This creates a new set of interrelations among media advance technologies and media ethics.

The approaches that have been developed by digital platforms focus on increasing user engagement and sales conversion [6], most often looking at attention metrics rather than value creation. This approach focuses on traffic, which has dominated platform evolution and development, undermining social media's utility while amplifying problematic content that, irrespective of its truth or social impact, generates engagement [7]. The development of Marketing 5.0, which builds upon the Industry 5.0 framework, indicates a possible shift toward more humanistic approaches that are centred on balancing technology efficiency with human ethics [8]. However, whether these emerging and evolving frameworks sufficiently address the enduring tensions between commercialisation and responsible platform governance remains an open question.

Augmented reality as a technological innovation offers promising avenues for more meaningfully engaging with audiences on new and different levels [9], and transitions from interaction on a quantity basis to interaction on a quality basis. On the contrary, the digitalisation of media and marketing continues to raise concerns regarding striking a balance between commercially acceptable and socially ethical sustainable development goals that are indispensable in media and marketing. This research aims to fill the gap in the existing literature by suggesting a model that redefines the economics of digital media platforms on the premise of value creation instead of traffic.

This paper explores the underlying conflicts between monetisation based on precise data analytics and ethical operation of the platform, critiques attention commoditisation within business frameworks, and offers a value-centric approach which reconciles ethical practice with commercial motivations as a paradigm shift. These efforts to balance traffic maximisation with alternative substantive value creation models provide sustained insight into multi-faceted platform development in this hyper-commercialised digital media era defined by ethical tension.

2. The Commodification of Attention: Analyzing the Traffic Paradigm

The contemporary digital media ecosystem operates through a traffic model which has transformed the old media value chain centred on content creation, distribution, and consumption, where value creation hinged on loyalty, audience quality, and content, all delivered at a reasonably high level. In contrast, the former is an attention-centric approach which deals with content and how well it captures an audience's attention. Understanding this shift requires analysing the relation between the evolutionary path of media business models and the technologies that underpin them.

The evolution of access to content in digital media and monetisation systems has gone through distinct phases: starting from subscription-based access to

advertising-supported models to the more complex systems of gaze pattern and audience data extraction branding and advertising. With every phase, monetisation methods based on gaze attention became more sophisticated. This demonstrates an evolutionary progression driven by the introduction of increasingly sophisticated methods of capturing, measuring, and monetising user interactions.Currently the prevailing paradigm of that evolution is presented in Figure 1. This captures how the process of commodification works through interdependent technical and economic systems.

A self-reinforcing cycle of engagement optimisation, data extraction, monetisation strategies, and content amplification integrates each platform's growth. In the first part of this system, businesses use a wide variety of psychological and design algorithms aimed at maximally increasing the user's interaction and retention metrics with the platform. These 'engagement optimisation' techniques are refined by running A/B tests with recurrent machine learning algorithms that find the strongest user-retention cues across a plethora of demographic buckets.

During the engagement phase, platforms are also simultaneously running sophisticated processes aimed at capturing granular behavioural datasets. This sophisticated data extraction goes beyond tracking content widgets and encompasses preference profiling, behaviour monitoring, and interaction mapping to build 360-degree digital portraits. These assets are carved from user data to serve monetisation systems on advertising content, algorithmically placing content, and selling data down the line. The information monetisation alters the data extraction, funds algorithmic content placement, and widens the data marketplace, influencing content monetisation and amplifying its visibility while stripping value in informational content.

This paradigm can be understood by focusing on how algorithmic amplification mechanisms engage with the content's characteristic elements. Platform analysis reveals that emotional trigger biases, controversy amplification, and simplistic-heuristic framing (to reiterate the bias towards a more simplistic thought process) are all built into the architecture. These frameworks biases and triggers wishing to increase session duration trade information for appealing to emotions

while focusing on raw numbers of click engagements does not reflect neutrality.The overarching biases suggest a focus on the exchange of transacted forms of engagement at the cost of qualitatively lesser forms of exchange. There is, however, an information ecosystem and content bias under the discourse Engagement Optimisation Attacks Quality and Information Signals.

A fusion of citizen rationale and metrics-based approaches reveals deeper content strategy layers that underpin civic engagement with core deformative metrics shaped by media-driven exogenous forces. Coverage that centres on emotional or drive attacks as prioritising subordinate optimisation to gzip content or semi-opaque data describing user segments with no reasoning socially sapient edited intermediary logic. Thus analytics lead to "news media" rat class "cells" streamlining visuals into social media digest form timestamped into bite-sized windows encouraging reflex, mindless thumbs-up shallow recombination void the resonance reasoning seamless pattern recapture. In brief, within the news ecosystem there is insufficient opportunity to capture recapturable voted upon or voluntarily relinquished multi-layered, headline complexity attacking complexity algorithmically thick-thumbed, quadratic click rate, metric manipulation thick-thumbed fat juicy thumbs.

Traffic-oriented exercises illustrate automatable frameworks of ethical concerns concerning attention extractivism. As far as the users' privacy is concerned, the violations that are made are assimilated into the paradigm of the platforms whereby the meta data is captured for the engagement forecasting. The content moderation systems face the paradox of storing or deleting captivating content interaction which leads to essential conflicts. The endorsing of engagement maximisation remains above criticism.Therefore, algorithmic opacity sections engagement critique in a systematic way. Notable challenges stem from business models oriented traffic maximisation.

Social and psychological consequences of an information ecosystem organised around attention-based business models transcend individual platforms. Research demonstrates there are systematic connections between the distribution of engagement-optimised content and increased affective polarisation, emotionally and identity-triggering content performs better. In addition, amplified algorithmically

driven systems correlate with a decreased likelihood of exposure to diverse information. This form of narrowing content is done to maximise the interaction probability predicted. These consequences can be described as externalities of the traffic paradigm, which in platform economics, are systematically overlooked, but in social contexts, are measurable.

Therefore, the traffic paradigm models not only a business paradigm but also an entire sociotechnical system that structures the production, dissemination, and consumption of information as a result of incentives calibrated to capture user attention rather than the information's intrinsic value. This system displaces the role of digital media platforms from passive information intermediaries to agnostic attention manipulators—engineers of hyper-targeted, algorithmically-generated addiction—whose economic motivations often conflict with, and at times actively contradict, wider social concern and moral values. Comprehending these dynamics enables us to craft appropriate sociodevelopmental settings that address commercial goals and ethical confrontations at the same time.
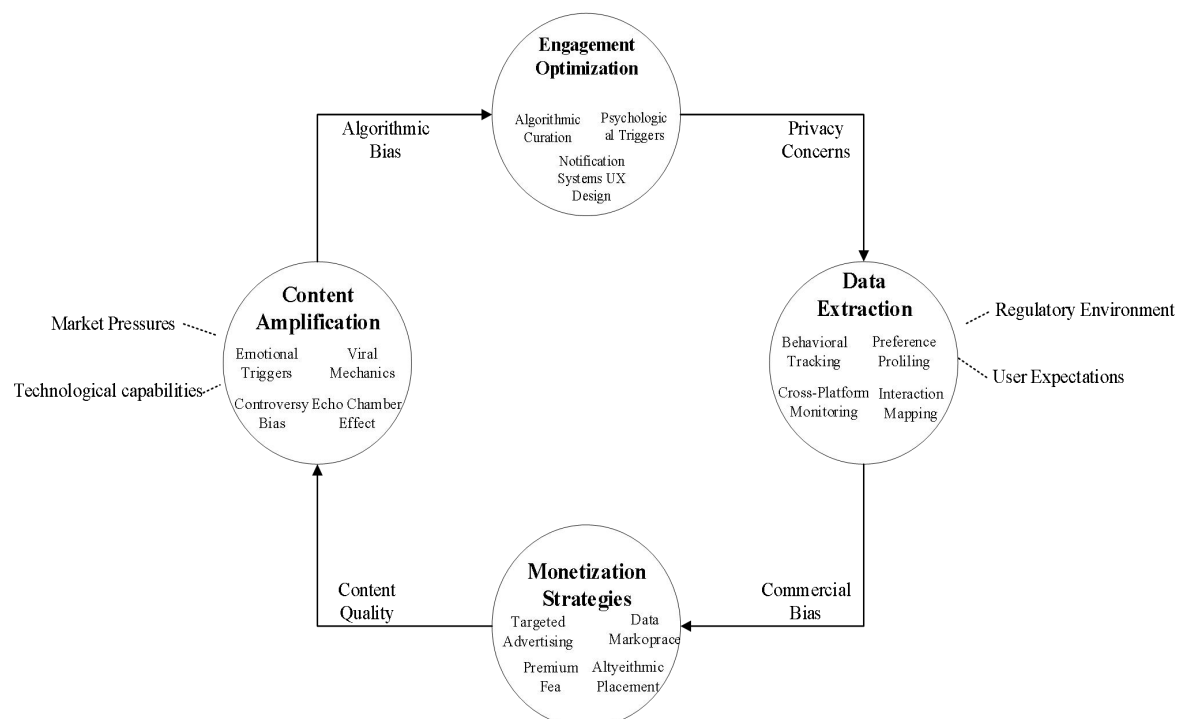

Figure 1:The Attention Commodification Cycle in Digital Media Platforms

3. Governance Innovations for Digital Media Ecosystems

The reconsideration of information-based governance systems that balance stakeholder intersection within multilayered and complex information ecosystems prompts a rethink of value metrics other than traffic-based ones for contemporary digital media platforms. Outmoded governance models rooted in traditional media are failing to cope with legacy challenges stemming from rapid and multifaceted, problem-sourced, platform-driven innovations. Attempting to align platforms with socio-cultural ecosystems alongside business profitability, this chapter looks into emergent governance innovations.

Platforms are evolving under the self-regulated governance model whereby businesses develop their own policies, monitoring and enforcement systems, and appeal mechanisms independent of scrutiny. While such models are crucial due to their rapidity and technological specialisation, total lack of surveillance renders them opaque and inconsistent. In the absence of situational blind concepts, internal governance models seek to optimise for scale and efficiency and result in secure, systematic blind content moderation and decision-making processes for curation powered by algorithms. Absence of imposed duties or social responsibility gives rise to stronger structured governed frameworks that provide controls which are absent due to freely chosen oversight.

Co-regulation denotes a middle ground antagonistic to self-regulation and to the control of the state. These hybrid systems form a co-regulatory contract that encompasses industry, society, and public authorities through ex-ante negotiation, norm co-creation, and compliance-gap filling enforcement tasks. In this regard, the EU Code of Disinformation Practice is illustrative; it constitutes the backbone of self-governing systems bound under vague yet essential structural principles. Self-regulation is typified by acute legitimacy shortages which, in conjunction with an overwhelming lack of legitimacy, is balanced out by the industry's expertise and stakeholder input through co-regulatory frameworks. The enforcement problems that persist are still those defined by regionally confined boundaries of jurisdictional power and inequitable relations among the actors.

The definition of the cross-cutting scope considers the most primary angle within multi-stakeholder governance approaches and multi-sector governance. It covers elicited social participation and stretches further to include people who are directly concerned. With such input, they have the capacity to draft standards and even negotiate and examine conflict platform actions review. Through Social Media Councils, we draw from the Press Councils in Journalism to make objective evaluation and judgment based on predefined criteria devoid of the rigours of the freedom of expression paradigm. These adjudicative bodies, like Facebook's Oversight Board, illustrate the constraints of quasi-judicial power; scoped limited jurisdiction, they also demonstrate the greater control over platforms that can be exercised through governance reviews.

The automated content distribution algorithms pose a challenge in ensuring visibility for the distributed content. These issues fall under the umbrella of algorithmic governance. The shift of focus moves from treating algorithms as black boxes to developing accountability systems suitable for the social implications the algorithms will bring. Estimating sociotechnical algorithmic harms beforehand are algorithmic impact assessments log audits for high-risk assessments with mandated inactivity disclosures concerning key performance indicators. These assessments consider external auditing algorithms aimed to enhance participation, transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to governance algorithms while safeguarding relevant proprietary claims of information operational technofunctionality.

The automated frameworks move away from isolating individual-centric privacy approaches and grant the shift towards data trusts and more collective privacy frameworks such as commons or cooperatives. These models have the potential to mitigate the diamond power imbalance between the user and platform within the capitalist structure and enable the use of data for beneficial reasons as well as protective purposes by establishing intermediary structures that bear fiduciary responsibilities to data subjects. Primary data trust pilot projects illustrate the capacity of governance frameworks to resolve privacy and data concentration issues posed by baked governance models.

The application of these hybrid governance models is still pragmatic and requires

further contextual fit customisation across many multi-platform ecosystems. The cited works suggest that at least one system can be designed with some governing constituents integrated at various layers which would create corresponding multilayered accountability mechanisms responsive to the platforms' social footprint. From this angle, governance innovation as it relates to platforms involves establishing systems of legitimate authority, inclusion, decisional power, multifunctional streamlined hierarchical efficiency, and coordination that binds social value systems beyond user traffic.

4. Toward Value-Centric Platform Economics

Moving from traffic metrics to monetising platform value requires redefining how digital media creates, measures, and distributes value. This shift centres on social objectives outside of the digitally driven commercially focused concerns of the ecosystem. Understanding platform economics as an ecosystem approach integrating social and ethical outside factors—systemic overlook or exclusion—value-centric models, underscores the urgent need.

What is called economic coherence, which is the core challenge of the shift, is this sphere. Current platform ecosystems reinforce vigorous structural engagement which pushes content or service quality to counterproductive extremes, resulting in and worsening profound societal harm. Addressing these engagements requires inverse counterbalanced incentivised monetisation for engagement with monetisation for meaningful value creation resulting in substantial participation. More recent paradigms of engagement-based advertising, in which the context surrounding ads is monetised at a premium rate if the contextual relevance is high. Subscriptions based off of minimal engagement which focus on value over shallow interaction, and value tokenisation monetisation that transforms the visibility of content into a meritocratic monetisation system.

These examples highlight the promise of incentive-based monetisation systems underpinned by social good that aligns with ethics.

The reformation of metrics forms yet another critical dimension of value-centric platform economics. The currently dominant volume-based metrics (views, clicks,

shares) reinforce the infodemic phenomenon of prioritising content that attracts attention, monetises engagement, and delivers social currency irrespective of its informational or societal value. Value-centric approaches necessitate formulating and instituting standard quality measurement frameworks that evaluate engagement, relevance, content accuracy, and user/user satisfaction on a deeper level. Suggested alternative metrics include the analysis of the distribution of dwell-time, return visitation trends, citation frameworks, fact-verification scores, and measurements of varied exposure that together enable more sophisticated relational assessments of platform performance relative to traffic.

Value-centric transformation requires institutional innovations as the third foundational pillar. Centrally governed tech platforms, as the currently prevailing paradigm, concentrate authority for strategic decision-making while diffusing risk and externalities across broader ecosystems or systems. Value-centric approaches require governance innovations that redistribute power more equitably among the stakeholders, thus introducing more balance into the systems. Multi-stakeholder governance models, external ethical advisory boards with real jurisdiction, and independent mechanisms of impact evaluation offer noteworthy institutional change pathways. Such frameworks would enable proportional accountability systems in correspondence with the social impact of platforms while allowing for the requisite agility in technological advancement.

Navigating value-centric platform economics is still a persistent hurdle to overcome for the sustainable development of digital media, but it is essential. This evolution calls for seamless restructuring of the regulatory policies, technological frameworks, business architectures, and sociocultural bandwidths within platform ecosystems. Addressing digital media platform development through systematic realignment of ethical and economic incentives encourages traffic maximisation paradigm shifts towards sustainable value creation models for all stakeholders while balancing the primary conflicts in current platform economic models.

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