Should Platforms be Publicly Owned and Controlled?

Escaping the power of digital platforms is hard. Just consider how they show up in your everyday life.

At some point, you've likely relied on Google for internet searches, Amazon for buying consumer goods, Facebook for communicating with friends, Tinder for finding dates, YouTube for entertainment, Uber for transportation, Airbnb for vacation stays, Yelp for deciding what businesses to use, Apple App Store for downloading software – the list goes on.

And as becomes apparent when you encounter a problem with these platforms, using them means entering a space of influence and control. Purchase more goods than normal while moving, and Amazon might lock your account. Watch one conspiratorial video on YouTube, and your Home feed might recommend you an endless diet of the same.

Foreswear all platforms, and you'll still be under their power. Maybe you never use Facebook to get the news. But a lot of people around you do, and by influencing what information they see, Facebook can influence what they believe and so how they behave, such as how they vote. Maybe you never use Airbnb. But you might have less housing options because people in your community decided to buy up properties and list them on the platform.

How these platforms should use their power is accordingly an important question. Even if you have no opinion about it, life will assume one for you. Like it or not,

all the platforms mentioned above are privately owned and controlled as for-profit businesses. This arrangement has struck many as the root of various evils.

To give some examples: The page rank of Google search results is heavily influenced by how much website owners pay to promote their content. In *Algorithms of Oppression*, Safiya Umoja Noble explains how this has contributed to basic searches for 'black girls' returning pornographic and sexualized results.[1] Platforms in general enable the everyday interactions we have over them to be quantified into valuable data. In *The Costs of Connection*, Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias argue this threatens to subject all of us to a new form of colonialism in which our lives are increasingly turned into sites of resource extraction.[2]

Government regulations enforcing standards for privacy, content moderation, and other issues might help mitigate these evils but could also make them worse. The largest, wealthiest platforms may well afford to circumvent or violate regulations, if not control which ones get created in their favour.[3] It's accordingly worth considering pulling up the root and putting platforms under some governance structure other than private ownership and control. But what alternative should we choose? In everyday language, we often contrast 'private' with 'public'. So, it makes sense to focus on the most prominent alternative and ask whether platforms should be publicly owned and controlled.

My answer: No, they should not.

I draw this conclusion after considering the three most prominent arguments for answering 'Yes', which I call the Argument from Public Utility, the Argument from Non-

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[1]Noble (2018: 64-109).
[2] Couldry and Mejias (2019: x).
[3] Muldoon (2022: 4, 54, 114), Tarnoff (2022: 68, 153).

Domination, and the Argument from Public Interest Alignment. The shortcoming of these arguments is not that they fail to show private ownership and control of platforms is problematic. Rather, these arguments fail to justify governing platforms in a way that can be reasonably construed as undertaken by the public. In fact, examining them reveals that any argument for public ownership and control of platforms ultimately confronts what I call the Representation Problem: a group formed from the public can responsibly control a platform only if it no longer represents the public.

1. Preliminaries

Before considering these arguments, I should offer three points of clarification.

The first concerns my general approach to settling our focus question. There are two routes I will not be taking, both of which proceed from a more general claim about ownership and control.

One might think platforms should be publicly owned and controlled because everything should be publicly owned and controlled. Perhaps this is because one holds a communist or anarchist view according to which there should be no private property.[4]

I avoid this route because I assume some standard version of liberal political theory is correct. According to liberal theory, we ought to respect the ability of individuals to pursue their own view of the good as free and equal persons.[5] This requires giving individuals a package of moral rights that protects their pursuit of the good from interference. Rights to free association, to contract, and to own and acquire property are

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[4] See Marx and Engels (2012: 85) for a statement of this view within communism and Milstein (2010: 33, 81) for one within anarchism.
[5] Quong (2011: 14).

within this package. In order to avoid violating these rights, it must be permissible to privately own and control at least some platforms.

Alternatively, one might think platforms should not be publicly owned and controlled because nothing should be publicly owned and controlled. I avoid this route for the same reason. Individuals are within their rights to associate with each other and build platforms that are publicly owned and controlled if they want. These platforms would exist alongside those that are privately owned and controlled.

Given my starting assumption, the interesting territory to explore is whether any platforms that are currently privately owned and controlled should be placed under public ownership and control. Although I adopt a liberal view of rights, I'm also not going to assume that rights are side-constraints that foreclose this option. Our individual rights to freely associate and own property can be overridden when there is sufficient moral reason to do so, for instance when they significantly threaten other people's freedom and equality.[6]

The issue to examine is whether such reason exists when it comes to platforms and whether it sufficiently favours their public ownership and control over alternatives to private ownership and control. Such alternatives exist. Although 'private' and 'public' are often opposed, some platform government structures fit into neither category. For instance, platforms could instead be worker owned and controlled.[7] Or, they could be governed as cooperatives – institutions owned and controlled by their members – at least assuming adequately restrictive barriers to membership.[8]

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[6] Macpherson (1977: 16), Bird (2006: 109-110).
[7] Muldoon (2022: 84).
[8] Tarnoff (2022: 167).

This brings us to our second point of clarification. When does a platform count as 'publicly owned and controlled' in the first place? I propose that whatever meaning we give to this phrase must pass what I call the Face Test: It's appropriate to call a platform 'publicly owned and controlled' only if we can face the general public and use these words to advocate for a platform governance structure without anyone reasonably considering themselves deceived or manipulated upon learning the governance structure they would actually get.

Adopting the Face Test places stringent conditions on what we should call publicly owned and controlled that favour interpreting this phrase literally.[9] To deserve this label, a platform governance structure must include some group that no one could reasonably consider deceptive or manipulative to call the public. And within this governance structure, it must be the case that no one could reasonably consider it deceptive or manipulative to say this group controls the platform. A similar condition holds for ownership.

Suppose someone called for making a platform publicly owned and controlled when what she meant was that shares in the company managing the platform should be traded on the public stock market and their owners given voting rights over some of the company's decisions. It would be reasonable to consider this call deceptive or manipulative. At least one problem is that public control suggests to many people a form of governance that is more inclusive and effective than this. Facebook is already publicly owned and controlled in the sense this person assumes. But its stock is expensive: one

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[9] This stringency is additionally justified given the commitments of my main interlocuters, Ben Tarnoff, Dan Hind, and James Muldoon. Tarnoff (2022: xv) says his advocacy for "an internet where people, and not profit, rule" should be understood "literally". Muldoon (2022: 71) and Hind (2019, September 20: 5, 7) are both critical of how calls to democratize platforms are deceptive or manipulative.

share currently costs more than $400 USD, making stock ownership a luxury for much of the public. Furthermore, even stock owners are granted very limited power over most decisions within Facebook. Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's founder and CEO, historically has enjoyed outsized control over decisions thanks to owning a special kind of stock, each share of which is worth ten times more votes than those of a regular stock owner.[10]

Despite its stringency, adopting the Face Test is defensible. One reason to do so is based on my commitment to liberalism. In order to respect people's ability to pursue their own view of the good as free and equal, significant changes to the institutions structuring their lives must be justifiable on the basis of reasons that everyone can accept.[11] This standard is not met if people could reasonably consider themselves deceived or manipulated when comparing the institutions they get to the ones they were promised. Deceiving and manipulating people circumvents their ability both to judge for themselves whether proposed institutional changes are good and to accept them on equal terms.

Another reason is that we shouldn't deceive or manipulate people, regardless of our broader theoretical commitments. There is unfortunately a significant danger of this when it comes to calls for participatory governance. As the writer and public servant Sherry Arnstein describes in her influential article, 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation', calls for public control of institutions often results in giving the public little real power over how institutions operate.[12] Instead, this rhetoric may camouflage an intention to merely consult the public or associate them with a project to make it look more

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[10] Lauricella and Norton (2021, October 7).
[11] Waldron (1987: 134, 149), Schwartzman (2011: 375, 377-378), Larmore (2015: 78).
[12] Arnstein (1969).

acceptable.[13] Adopting the Face Test helps avoid this result. It encourages a match between the governance structures for which we advocate and the ones people reasonably expect to get.

By now, I've said something about my general approach and how we should understand public ownership and control. As a third point of clarification, I should also say something about what platforms are and how they function.

Paradigmatically, a platform is an intermediary that captures value by owning a digital medium on which multiple, independent users interact.[14] By 'users', I mean everyone who engages with a platform, from advertisers and developers to mere commenters and content viewers. For instance, Google provides an online medium that connects advertisers and internet searchers. Google captures value from these interactions by selling access to the searchers to advertisers. Amazon provides an online medium that connects buyers and sellers. Amazon captures value from these interactions by making a commission on items sold.

The digital nature of platforms enables an immense capacity to surveil and control interactions between users.[15] This can be obscured by the tendency of platforms like Facebook to present themselves as just technology companies or neutral intermediaries that merely connect people, similar to a postal system.[16] But as early attempts of platforms like eBay to avoid interfering with their users showed, platforms must moderate their users or else become filled with scams and inappropriate

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[13] This concern applies to platforms as well. Muldoon (2022: 71) criticizes their owners for similarly misusing the rhetoric of democracy.
[14] Srnicek (2017: 24).
[15] Yeung (2017: 123).
[16] Muldoon (2022:14).

content.[17] Furthermore, even seemingly innocuous decisions about platform architecture, such as whether to include a dislike button, encourage or discourage behaviours like trolling and other forms of harassment and so are laden with moral value.[18]

It consequently makes sense to ask who should have power over these decisions by owning and controlling platforms. Let's accordingly consider the arguments in favour of placing this power in the hands of the public.

2. The Argument from Public Utility

We'll start with the Argument from Public Utility. Chief Justice Waite gave an early formulation of this argument in the 1876 Supreme Court case *Munn v. Illinois*, which established regulations for grain pricing in the United States. As Waite said, "When… one devotes his property to a use in which the public has an interest, he, in effect, grants to the public an interest in that use, and must submit to be controlled by the public for the common good, to the extent of the interest he has thus created."[19]

The specific public interest test Waite suggested was later rejected as insufficiently clear.[20] Since then, public utility theorists have tended to argue that a private enterprise warrants alternative control when two conditions are met.[21] First, the enterprise must provide infrastructure on which some vital public interest depends. Second, the market forces acting on this enterprise must be inadequate to protect this interest.

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[17] Tarnoff (2022: 82), Zuckerman and Rajendra-Nicolucci (2023).
[18] Gillespie (2018: 42), BBC (2021, November 13).
[19] Munn v. Illinois (1876).
[20] Rahman (2018: 1637).
[21] Rahman (2018: 1637), Muldoon (2022: 68).

Platforms can arguably satisfy both conditions. At least some platforms operate as vital infrastructures. Amazon doesn't merely operate as an online marketplace. It is also essential for a significant amount of internet commerce by providing a delivery network for various retailers, cloud computing services, payment and credit lending, and so forth.[22] Google has similarly become essential not only for effective web searches, but also for everyday navigation, advertising, business applications, and a host of other goods.[23]

Next, it's commonly argued that platforms are bound to turn into monopolies thanks to the benefits they receive from network effects.[24] A network effect occurs when the more users a platform has, the more valuable it becomes. In the case of Amazon, more sellers leads to more available products, which makes the platform more attractive to buyers. Having more buyers in turn gives new sellers more reason to make their products available on the platform, thereby continuing the cycle.

In a physical space, this cycle faces limitations fairly quickly.[25] Imagine a farmer who runs a flea market by renting her land to vendors. More vendors will attract more buyers, in turn making renting space at the market more attractive to new vendors. But at some point, the costs of connection drastically increases: it will become very difficult for a buyer to find and visit a particular vendor in a sprawling marketplace filled with stalls and people.

Digital platforms minimize these connection costs. Search and ranking algorithms ensure users quickly find and purchase what they're looking for even as more

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[22] Khan (2017: 754-755).
[23] Rahman (2018: 1669)
[24] Muldoon (2022: 18), Srnicek (2017: 36-48), Lehdonvirta (2022: 128).
[25] Lehdonvirta (2022: 118).

and more users are added. The result is that platforms can reach a massive size and massive value. Amazon, for instance, frequently hosts over two billion visitors every month who can browse goods from approximately two million active sellers.[26] The total value of its stock is close to two trillion US dollars – more than the GDP of the vast majority of countries.[27]

Once a platform grows large enough, network effects make it difficult for competitors to offer alternative services. A new platform needs some kind of content to attract new users. Although a core group of users might create some content for a new platform, the comparatively much larger amount of content on the original platform gives its existing and potential users a strong incentive to not defect to the new platform.

The overall result is a failure of market forces to ensure the kind of competition that might otherwise prevent a platform from monopolizing some vital infrastructure. Dominant platforms can further entrench their position through buying out competitors, engaging in predatory pricing, and requiring users to sign unfair contracts.[28] And while it might be possible to break up a large platform, network effects threaten that one of the pieces will simply grow back into a monopoly.[29] Under these conditions – the argument goes – it is justified to impose alternative forms of ownership and control on a platform to defend the public's interests.

But there's a problem. Despite what the opening quote from Chief Justice Waite suggests, these alternative forms of ownership and control fail the Face Test as forms of public ownership and control.

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[26] eDesk (2024, February 6).
[27] Wallach (2021, July 7).
[28] Lehdonvirta (2022: 220-221), Muldoon (2022: 67).
[29] Lehdonvirta (2022: 220).

Some public utility theorists don't even advocate for alternative forms of platform ownership.[30] They instead argue we can adequately defend the public's interest by heavily regulating how platforms operate while keeping them in private hands.[31] Others appeal to considerations like the ones just raised to advocate for nationalizing platforms or, in other words, putting them under government ownership and control.[32] Although government ownership and control is often equated to public ownership and control, it's reasonable to consider this equation deceptive or manipulative. As the political theorist James Muldoon remarks, "nationalization simply replaces private oligarchs with distant bureaucrats."[33]

Muldoon likely thinks this because government control over utilities typically involves members of the public electing politicians who appoint the individuals directly in charge of managing the utility. While this gives the public some influence over how the utility is run, it makes the public's power to effect changes in the utility extremely tenuous. As the political philosopher Ugur Aytac observes, we can't reasonably construe the public as exerting control through the elected politicians because they, "are subject to immense self-interested pressures from a variety of sources, including their own interests as career politicians, electoral short-termism, and corporate lobbying, and... are incentivized to shape the political process in favor of the powerful and wealthy."[34]

The Argument from Public Utility might give us good reason to not leave some platforms under private ownership and control. But it gives us insufficient reason to

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[30] Muldoon (2022: 69).
[31] Rahman (2018: 1625-1626) Khan (2017: 797).
[32] Howard, (2012, August 16), Campbell (2020, March 26).
[33] Muldoon (2022: 85).
[34] Aytac (2024: 7).

favour a platform governance structure that passes the Face Test as a form of public ownership and control. Let's see if we fare any better with the Argument from Non-Domination.

3. The Argument from Non-Domination

Advocates for alternative platform governance structures often emphasize that platforms give their owners immense power over others. The writer Ben Tarnoff remarks that Facebook's shareholder structure makes it "more or less a personal dictatorship" wielded by Mark Zuckerberg over its billions of users.[35] James Muldoon likewise deplores that we simply accept the status of platforms as "privately owned fiefdoms ruled by a tech despot."[36] In a similar vein, the journalist Dan Hind characterizes platforms as "artificial habitats whose elements can be arranged and rearranged at the whims of their owners."[37]

One might think platforms need to be publicly owned and controlled to avoid these inequitable power relationships. As James Muldoon later says, "The amount of direct power [tech entrepreneurs] exercise over decisions that affect the lives of billions of people should be more shocking than it often is." He claims solving this problem requires "a new set of institutional arrangements that will guarantee the public rights of participation and control over the governance of digital platforms."[38]

What these writers are worried about is domination. Domination is a hierarchical relationship involving one person's holding unchecked power over another. Domination

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[35] Tarnoff: (2022: 154).
[36] Muldoon (2022: 2).
[37] Hind (2019: 6).
[38] Muldoon (2022: 72).

doesn't require exercising this power, just the potential to use it.[39] A despot who benevolently declines to execute a peasant in his fiefdom still dominates the peasant, even if the despot's benevolence is robust.

Domination furthermore doesn't happen in just any relation of unchecked power. At least two necessary conditions must be met. First, the dominator's power must not be easily avoided. A despot does not dominate you – even if he wants to execute you – if you can easily avoid stepping foot in his fiefdom. Second, the dominator's power has to be over morally important interests. Fulfilling this condition requires platforms do more than pervasively impact our daily lives. Thanks to TikTok, you might frequently see people engaging in silly dances or frequently be invited to partake in a dance yourself. This might frequently annoy you, but that alone doesn't make you dominated.

That said, platform owners plausibly dominate us, and they can dominate us even if we are not members of their platforms. Consider that Facebook can arguably swing elections.[40] Giving Facebook users the option to display an 'I voted' button has been shown to boost voter turnout in the areas where its users live. By enabling this option for some users and not others, Facebook can selectively boost voting in the right districts to control which candidates get elected. This would be an exercise of power over one of your morally important interests – an interest in a free and fair election. Facebook's owners might benevolently decline to exercise this power. But again, exercising power is not required for domination.

So, let's assume platform owners dominate us and that domination ought to be avoided. We still have to fill in the rest of the argument. One could observe that platform

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[39] Pettit (2012: 7, 50, 67).
[40] Brand (2016, September 27).

owners wouldn't dominate us if platforms were instead publicly owned and controlled. From here, one might conclude that platforms ought to be publicly owned and controlled.

Now, one *might* conclude this, but one shouldn't: the argument as formulated is invalid. Platform owners also wouldn't dominate us if platforms were instead owned and controlled by golden retrievers. But we of course shouldn't conclude that platforms ought to be owned and controlled by golden retrievers. To make the argument work, we need to establish that public ownership and control of platforms is morally preferable among the various means to prevent domination by platform owners. There are at least three reasons to doubt this can be done.

First, one person's domination of another can be removed if the dominator's power is adequately checked.[41] This checking doesn't have to be done by the person dominated. Suppose the schoolyard bully dominates you by always beating you up for your lunch money. You don't have to be able to fight back for the bully's power to be checked – this can be done if your Big Brother is always at your side to ward the bully off.

If platform owners are the bully, we seemingly have a Big Brother always at our side, namely the government. By threatening fines, forced restructurings, and other interventions, governments can check platform owners' power and prevent them from undermining morally important interests of individuals within the public. The government's playing this role is furthermore morally preferable. Controlling a large, complex structure like a digital platform is burdensome.[42] Governments already have the means and experience to regulate businesses and protecting the public's interests

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[41] Maas (2022: 1494).
[42] Himmelreich (2023: 1340).

is among their accepted aims. So, it's fairer to expect governments to check platform power rather than place this burden on the public.

This assumes, of course, that governments will be good Big Brothers to the public, as opposed to something like bad, Orwellian ones. We saw in the previous section that the immense self-interested pressures on politicians give us reasons to doubt this will be the case. To expand on just one of those reasons, note that platforms are among the biggest lobbyists.[43] Companies like Google and Amazon routinely spend large amounts of money influencing governments to craft legislation in their favour. Accordingly, one might reply that it's best for the public to defend itself because governments are easily made into accomplices of the public's domination.

This takes us to the second objection. Removing domination doesn't require the public to control platforms. Consider the bully example again. To prevent the bully from dominating you, you don't have to *control* the bully, which would involve your being able to direct all his actions however you want. You merely need to *constrain* the bully so that he can't undermine your interests. Within the bounds of this constraint, the bully can still do what he wants.

Similarly, the public needn't control platforms to avoid domination; the public merely needs to constrain them. Along this line, the economist and politician Yanis Varoufakis has proposed adopting a "Social Accountability Act", which involves forming juries by random selection from platform stakeholders.[44] These juries would develop standards for acceptable platform operation, monitor platforms for compliance with these standards, and deregister platforms that fail to meet them.

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[43] Muldoon (2022: 147), Chee (2021, August 31).
[44] Varoufakis (2023: 197-198).

This Social Accountability Act would prevent domination. But it fails the Face Test to call adopting this act a form of public ownership and control of platforms. First, the juries described in the act don't own the platforms they monitor.[45] Second, these juries are empowered only to constrain platforms to operate within the standards they decide. Constraint is not control. Equating these terms can reasonably be considered deceptive or manipulative as it would lead the public to expect a greater degree of power over platforms than what they would actually get.

At this point, maybe you think these considerations are incorrect. But we still have a third objection to consider. The Argument from Non-Domination presupposes that, if given control of platforms, the public will use its power in ways that are adequately aligned with the morally important interests of its members instead of undermining them like any other dominator. There's good reason to doubt this presupposition.

Liberal political philosophers historically have worried that granting power to the public can lead to domination. As John Stuart Mill wrote in his famous treatise *On Liberty* in 1859, "the people… may desire to oppress a part of their number, and precautions are as much needed against this as against any other abuse of power."[46] In the next section, I'll argue that this worry is well-founded. I'll also argue that the precautions needed to avoid this worry prevent us from adopting a platform governance structure that passes the Face Test as a form of public ownership and control.

In the meantime, suffice it to say that concerns about domination inadequately support making platforms publicly owned and controlled. At best, these concerns

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[45] In Yanis' model, platforms would be worker owned. (2023: 195) We saw earlier that worker ownership is not public ownership.
[46] Mill (1974: 62).

support public constraint of platforms. At worst, they provide reasons against their public control. Unless the public is adequately disposed to respect the interests of all its members, adopting public control could merely exchange one dominator for another. We can consider this possibility in more detail through the Argument from Public Interest Alignment, to which we now turn.

4. The Argument from Public Interest Alignment

This argument is motivated by the observation that private ownership and control of platforms often creates perverse incentives to favour profit at the expense of the public interest. We already saw some examples in the introduction. Let's consider more.

Tarnoff warns that running platforms as privately owned, for-profit businesses makes them "inequality machines".[47] As he explains, "The exploitation of gig and ghost workers; the reinforcement of racism, sexism, and other oppressions; the amplification of right-wing propaganda—none of these diverse forms of social damage would exist if they weren't profitable." Hind similarly claims that private ownership and control of platforms means "Friends and family can be made to serve as vehicles for paid for content on an unprecedented scale; our wider social networks can be made up of deceptive and malicious actors; our ideas of what constitutes 'common sense' can be algorithmically steered towards hair-raising extremes."[48]

One might think we need to make platforms publicly owned and controlled to avoid these problems, since the public is best able to advance the interests of its members. If platforms were publicly owned, members of the public would be

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[47] Tarnoff: (2022: 154).
[48] Hind (2019: 6).

incentivized to make them function for their own benefit, free of the need to maximize profits for shareholders.[49] And if platforms were publicly controlled, members of the public would have the power to act on these incentives.

However, I'm not convinced by this argument. This is because of a problem I think confronts any argument for the public control of platforms. Imagine if platforms were publicly controlled in the most literal sense to ensure a governance structure that passes the Face Test: instead of being run by CEOs and boards of directors, all members of the public had an equal and collectively effective say in how platforms function. There are at least five reasons platforms controlled in this way would be inadequately aligned with public interests. The problem is that their remedies require modifying this platform governance structure into something that no longer passes the Face Test for public control.

The first reason is that empirical studies often reveal voters to be extremely ignorant about basic facts required to make good political choices, such as the arrangement of their government, the general allocation of state budgets, and so forth.[50] This ignorance is rational.[51] Given the small impact any voter has on election outcomes, any voter has little incentive to become informed. The same effect would happen if platforms were publicly controlled in a scenario like the one imagined above. It would moreover be exacerbated given the large number of platforms that should be aligned with public interests. The remedy for this problem must be to increase the impact members of the public can have when making decisions about platforms by at least

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[49] Hind (2019: 12), Muldoon (2022: 73), Tarnoff (2022: 159).
[50] Brennan (2016: 24-26).
[51] Brennan (2016: 30).

restricting them to form mini-publics: these are relatively small groups of people selected from the public to be responsible for controlling any single platform.

Second, both the technical and contextual nature of decisions about platforms will make it difficult for people in the mini-publics to make competent decisions. The remedy for this problem must be to upskill and educate these groups to the specific tasks to which they are assigned. As a result, we can expect the information on which these groups base their decisions to be very different from the information about platforms readily accessible to the public at large.

Third, these restricted and specially trained groups could very well be composed of individuals whose personal interests are misaligned with public interests. Consider what would happen if a group drawn from the public and tasked to make decisions about Airbnb had lots of members who owned properties listed on the platform. They would have a strong incentive to make decisions favourable to their keeping these properties and to try to convince other members to think the same. The remedy for this problem must be to carefully curate the composition of these groups so that the balance of their members' interests does not incentivise them to undermine the interests of the public at large.

Fourth, these restricted, trained, and carefully curated groups are liable to be influenced by ill-willed members. Spend a bit of time reading internet comment sections, and it's easy to see that lots of people are racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, and so forth. Various studies indicate these attitudes influence how people vote.[52] They're also liable to influence decisions within mini-publics.[53] Remedying this

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[52] Smith (2020: 31-33), Schaffner et al. (2018).
[53] Fiskin (2009: 165), Lafont (2015: 51).

problem must at least involve regulating the input it's acceptable for members of these groups to make in the first place.

Fifth and finally, these restricted, trained, curated, and regulated groups are likely to become targets of well-organized and ill-willed external actors, such as businesses and special interest coalitions that will try to manipulate these groups to act in their favour. The remedy for this problem must be to insulate these groups from being pressured in their decisions by businesses and the general public, similar to how we do with juries.[54]

Let's take stock. For members of the public to control platforms in a manner adequately aligned with public interests, they must at least be formed into mini-publics that are heavily restricted in size, given special training, carefully curated, regulated in their deliberative inputs, and insulated from external pressure, including pressure from the general public. But a group that is restricted, trained, curated, regulated, and insulated no longer represents the general public, even if its decisions often align with public interests by tracking what's best for the public.[55] Decisions by this group won't reliably express decisions explicitly preferred by the public – an outcome that has been observed in actual mini-publics.[56] Under this governance structure, members of the public can reasonably consider themselves ruled by something other than their own will.

In other words, for a group formed from the public to make decisions that adequately align with public interests, the group must have features such that it fails the Face Test to call control by this group control by the public. Since adequate alignment

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[54] Lafont (2015: 46).
[55] See Olsen and Trenz (2014: 129) and Lafont (2015: 50, 52) for similar points.
[56] Lafont (2015: 52).

with public interests ought to be required of any platform governance structure, this is a problem for any argument that platforms should be publicly owned and controlled.[57] Let's call it the Representation Problem.

5. Conclusion

The Representation Problem is the ultimate reason I think platforms shouldn't be publicly owned and controlled.

At the same time, this result is *not* good news for the view that platforms should be privately owned and controlled. All the arguments we've considered may give us good reason to take various platforms out of private hands and put them in someone else's, such as those of their workers, cooperatives, government bureaus, or carefully crafted mini-publics. But calling these alternatives public ownership and control is at best a hollow slogan. The public has heard too many hollow slogans, and it would be wrong to drive people further into distrust and cynicism by telling more of them.

So, by all means, let's experiment with a government of platforms that is *of* the public and *for* the public, but let's not deceive or mislead ourselves into thinking we've found good reason to have government of platforms *by* the public.

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[57] For instance, Muldoon is ultimately in favour of public controlling platforms via electing delegates. (2022: 88) But the same considerations that should lead us to restrict the power the public can exercise over platforms through mini-publics should also lead us to restrict the same power when exercised through delegates. The authors I've discussed also sometimes appeal to the value of self-determination as a reason for the public to own and control platforms. (Tarnoff 2022: xv), (Muldoon 2022: 4) The public's self-determination also ought to be aligned with the public's interests. This section's considerations show that this condition is met only if decisions impacting public interests are determined by some group that doesn't count as the public.

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