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Digital platforms and democratic publics: How social media platforms selectively appropriate and strategically subvert institutional logics[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how social media platforms - as a new form of media organization - challenge the principles of a democratic public sphere, a key pillar of liberal-democratic societies. To do so, we draw on the institutional logics perspective, which allows connecting societal-level institutional orders with the ways in which organizations, sometimes strategically, use and thereby potentially redefine these orders. Based on comprehensive secondary data, we analyze YouTube as an exemplary case of how the logics of the market, the corporation, and the community are selectively appropriated and strategically subverted by large, centralized and commercially oriented social media platforms. YouTube rhetorically deploys market logic narratives of meritocratic competition and equal opportunity, yet operationally creates algorithmic hierarchies that favor established creators and concentrate market power. Similarly, the platform invokes the community logic by promoting democratic participation and collective expression while its algorithmic architecture amplifies polarizing content and fragments public discourse. The corporate logic manifests through bureaucratic governance structures that extend organizational control to users without reciprocal accountability mechanisms. Examining the Fediverse as an organizational alternative based on decentralized architectures and distributed governance, we argue that these mechanisms reflect strategic choices rather than technological inevitability. Highlighting the power of social media platforms to manipulate and undermine institutional logics, we discuss how contestation around their governance also entails contestation around the interinstitutional system structuring societies because of their important role in shaping the public sphere.

“We live in an organizational world. Virtually all of us are born in an organization—a hospital—with our very existence ratified by a state agency that issues a certificate documenting our birth. Under the current U.S. income tax regulations, if we are going to be claimed as a dependent on someone’s tax return, within the first year of our life we will be issued a social security number by an agency of the

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federal government. When we die, a death certificate will be issued by another public bureaucracy and our passing may be announced by a newspaper organization. (...)"

Pfeffer, 1997

"Today, much of our daily life is conducted on or with platforms. It is on platforms that we can access information, watch movies, listen to music, read books, shop for all kinds of products, archive documents, and find partners. We go to platforms to get a ride, book travel, support a cause, order food, or finance a project. Do you want to know what the people you care about are doing and thinking? Are you looking for someone for housekeeping, home repairs, medical advice, legal or accounting services, or lectures on any kind of topic? ... There are platforms for all of these and more."

Stark and Pais, 2020

1. Introduction

Democracy is under attack. The spread of the liberal-capitalist, democratic institutional project with its orientation towards economic growth, the establishment of a democratic state, a trust in the virtue of markets and an emphasis on individual freedom is currently questioned by both left and right-wing movements as well as by authoritarian and autocratic leaders (Guillén, 2018; Jepsen and Meyer, 2021; Lounsbury and Wang, 2020). In both public and academic debates, algorithmically governed, commercial social media platforms are said to bear significant responsibility for the current crisis of democracy, with some even seeing them as primary drivers (Andree, 2023). A democratic society relies on a public sphere in which citizens can engage, deliberate, and be transparently informed about political processes (Brunkhorst, Seeliger, and Sevigani, 2024). Marketized and commodified media organizations tend to be in conflict with the principles of equal and valid representation in the public sphere, because they are controlled by resource-commanding elites (Habermas, 1989; Herman, 2021). Large, centralized and profit-driven social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok constitute a specific form of media organization in that they function as both intermediaries and governors of user-generated content, wielding unprecedented control over information flows, cultural production, and public discourse through proprietary algorithmic systems that remain largely opaque to external scrutiny. Despite their initial promise to support liberal-democratic society by offering new forms of connectivity, knowledge sharing, education and culture, these platforms are particularly susceptible to mob-like dynamics and capture by right-wing movements.

To better understand how such platforms impact on the public sphere we draw on the institutional logics perspective, which conceptualizes modern society as structured by multiple coexisting institutional orders that constitute an interinstitutional system. Institutional logics represent relatively enduring configurations of symbolic meanings and material practices, theorized as instantiations of broader institutional orders including the community, corporate bureaucracy, the state, professions, religion, market, and family (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Lounsbury and Wang, 2020; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury, 2012). These logics manifest distinctively across different societies and organizational fields, creating varied instantiations of common institutional templates (Thornton et al., 2012). In this paper we argue that social media platforms occupy a unique societal position that transcends traditional boundaries, affording them substantial latitude not merely in deploying but in actively manipulating institutional logics for strategic and profit-oriented purposes. While existing research has recognized that platforms create hybrid governance structures through the unique mixing of market, corporate, and community logics (Frenken, Vaskelainen, Fünfschilling, and Piscicelli, 2020; Grabher and König, 2020; Watkins and Stark, 2018; Zhang, Hwang, Liu, Ribeiro, and Monroy-Hernández, 2025), less focus has been put on how social media platforms hereby potentially change these logics.

In this paper, we argue that large, centralized, profit-driven social media platforms selectively appropriate and strategically subvert the logics of the market, the corporation and the community, thereby affecting foundational pillars of liberal-capitalist, democratic societies. The idea that dominant organizational forms are co-constitutive of society dates back to Max Weber. He argued that formal, bureaucratic organizations encompassed a process of 'rationalization' characterizing modern societies. The bureaucratic organizational form supported rationalization through elements such as formal procedures, organizational sanctions, or hierarchical control (Besio, du Gay, and Serrano Velarde, 2020; Weber, 1968). These elements allow for procedural fairness and the possibility of appeal, both of which are core parts of a functioning democracy (Olsen, 2006). Digital platforms, not just in the media sphere, move away from formal organizational principles and instead are only partially organized (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011; Kirchner and Schuessler, 2019), thereby successfully evading accountability (Davis and DeWitt, 2022). Using the case of YouTube, a typical representative of globally dominant, centralized and profit-driven social media platforms, this paper analyzes how this particular form of platform organization simultaneously embraces and perverts the institutional logics of market, corporation, and community by creating a hybrid governance structure that serves commercial interests while maintaining legitimacy through a selective fulfillment of its promises to users. After outlining the core features of how YouTube creates, regulates and monetizes markets resting in particular on a singular public digital arena, proprietary, centralized algorithmic governance, and a profit and data-driven business model, we discuss decentralized, open and commons-oriented 'federated' social media platforms as an organizational alternative more in line with liberal, democratic principles.

Our analysis contributes to ongoing debates on digital platforms, in particular from an institutional perspective, in the following ways. First, research on platforms has established a critical distinction between the organization of the platform host organization and the organization of the 'crowd' - the users who interact in digital action spaces (e.g., Ametowobla and Kirchner, 2023; Bauer and Gegenhuber, 2015; Dolata and Schrape, 2023). However, less attention has been paid to how certain features of platform organization such as centralized algorithmic control, data extraction mechanisms, and proprietary governance structures (e.g., Stark and Pais, 2020;

Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal, 2018) shape the public arena. Given that, in the case of social media platforms, the crowd comprises a large part of society, we demonstrate how the selective appropriation of institutional logics in the governance of platforms simultaneously subverts these logics in the public sphere.

Second, we highlight that these effects reflect strategic choices rather than technological inevitability, because platforms rhetorically appeal to the logics of the market, the corporation and the community to gain legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), while diverging from these logics in the actual practices in which they create, regulate and monetize digital marketplaces. As an outlook, we point to alternative forms of platform organization more in line with liberal, democratic principles - while indicating a need to reform democratic societies away from a market towards a commons-based orientation (e.g. Etzioni, 2000, 2009). Social media platforms structured around decentralization rather than centralized control could lead to different dynamics in the public sphere and foster logics diversity (Almandoz and Thornton, 2025), granting communities more autonomy over content curation and moderation standards, enabling democratic deliberation rather than polarization, and allowing for distributed governance rather than proprietary control. In this sense, social media platforms and contestation around their governance constitute non-neutral battlegrounds where societal logics collide, are challenged, and can be transformed - in different directions.

2. Towards an institutional logics perspective on digital platforms

The digital transformation can be seen as “the combined effects of several digital innovations bringing about novel actors (and actor constellations), structures, practices, values, and beliefs that change, threaten, replace or complement existing rules of the game within organizations and fields” (Hinings, Gegenhuber, and Greenwood, 2018: 53). Digital platforms can be seen as a constitutive feature of late digital society, and terms such as platform economy (Kenney and Zysman, 2016) or platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017; Staab, 2019) indicate a broader societal and economic transformation associated with the spread of platform organizations. In a platform-mediated society, economic as well as social processes are shaped by globally operating platform companies such as Amazon, Apple, Google, Meta, or Microsoft, leading to the commodification of both private and public exchanges (Dolata, 2019; Van Dijck et al., 2018). This development not only marks the endpoint of the ‘organization society’ that Pfeffer (1997) described in the introductory quote (Davis, 2016), but undermines democratic principles because an algorithmically governed social order creates new participation possibilities, while restricting participation in decision-making (Stalder, 2016). Users on most platforms have limited to no control over the conditions under which they work (e.g., Maric, Schuessler, and Thäter, 2025).

Digital platforms are commonly defined as technology-enabled infrastructures operated by host organizations to facilitate the exchange between providers and consumers of goods, services, or knowledge (Gawer, 2010). It is important to distinguish the platform host organization - typically a rather small, formal organization often embedded in multinational technology companies - from structures and practices of platform organizing, which shape the dynamics of market, crowd or community transactions (Bauer and Gegenhuber, 2015; Kirchner and Schuessler, 2019; Langner and Seidel, 2015). Dolata and Schrape (2023) hence distinguish the platform-operating companies from the technologically mediated social action space that is typically referred to as the ‘platform’ (similarly Ametowobla and Kirchner, 2023). While initially narratives about sharing, autonomy, flexibility, openness, fluidity, and peer production accompanied the rise of the platform organization, dominant narratives now emphasize data extraction and processing, algorithmic governance, surveillance, social stratification (Fourcade, 2021; Healy, Nicholson, and Pekarek, 2017; Zuboff, 2018) as well as platform domination, power, centralization and control (Seemann, 2021; Kenney, Bearson, and Zysman, 2021; Schuessler, Attwood-Charles, Kirchner, and Schor, 2021). Platform governance is often described as ‘hybrid’, because it uses market, corporation and community mechanisms to coordinate crowds via a digital infrastructure (e.g. Kornberger, 2016; Zhang et al., 2024).

Organizational institutionalism emphasizes the interplay between organizational forms, such as the platform organization, and broader societal structures. Existing attempts to study digital platforms from an institutional perspective have so far either emphasized the role of national-level institutions in shaping different variants of platform organizing in the gig economy sector (e.g. Davis and Sinha, 2021; Mair and Reischauer, 2017; Thelen, 2018; Uzunca, Rigtering, and Ozcan, 2018) or have studied the ways in which platforms challenge established ensembles of institutional logics, again often on a national level and focusing on gig or sharing economy platforms (Frenken et al., 2020; Frenken and Fuenfschilling, 2021; Gegenhuber, Schuessler, Reischauer, and Thäter, 2022; Hinings et al., 2018). Regarding the former, Vallas and Schor (2020) use the term institutional chameleons to describe platforms' ability to flexibly adapt to different context conditions. Using a field perspective, several studies have emphasized the role played by national or local actors in regulating and thereby shaping platforms' impact on established markets (Kirchner and Schuessler, 2020; Pernicka and Schuessler, 2022; Wruk, Schöllhorn, and Oberg, 2020). Regarding the latter, some studies have applied an institutional logics perspective to look behind the facade of platform narratives and reveal the particular ways in which platforms organize economic exchanges. Frenken et al. (2020), for instance, argue that platforms have created tensions between the market and the corporate logic by establishing two market logics in parallel. Furthermore, by largely ignoring existing regulations or exploiting legal loopholes, platforms undermine the state logic.

With their focus on national or field-level institutions, however, these studies do not reveal the broader societal structuring effects of social media platforms. Indeed, Frenken et al. (2020) indicate that “a challenging question holds how the macro-level institutional logics themselves are subjected to change with the rise of the platform economy” (p. 101). Large social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram or TikTok transcend national boundaries and, as such, can be expected to reconfigure broader institutional logics, such as those characterizing liberal-capitalist, democratic societies. Since they contribute to spreading information, ideas and cultural content across borders, social media platforms can be seen as a public infrastructure. Some platforms have become state-like entities, acting as transnational rule makers over digital economies and the digital public sphere (e.g. Flyverbom, Deibert, and Matten, 2019; Lehdonvirta, 2022). At the same time, platforms do not openly assume this actorhood, instead presenting themselves as mere

intermediaries and enablers of individual freedom of expression (Haase et al., 2025).

In order to connect existing debates on platform organizations with broader societal changes, we follow Lounsbury and Wang's (2020) suggestion to apply an institutional logics perspective to better understand current changes to the liberal-capitalist democratic model that has characterized 'Western' societies for the last decades. The institutional logics perspective focuses its attention on how societies are symbolically and materially structured by different, partly contradictory institutional orders (e.g., capital, state, bureaucracy) that find their legitimacy at the national level within a system of interinstitutional relations that constitute society (Alford and Friedland, 1985). The dominant logics in contemporary Western societies include those of capitalism, the state, democracy, family and (Christian) religion (Friedland and Alford, 1991) as well as the logic of the market, the corporation, and the community (e.g. Thornton et al., 2012; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999). Thornton et al. (2012) have later developed a more actor-centric version of institutional logics that draws attention to how actors strategically manage these structural frames rather than how these frames construct the identities and roles of actors. Organizations, for instance, can strengthen their market position by using several logics simultaneously, thereby in turn changing these very logics (Durand, Szostak, Jourdan, and Thornton, 2013).

Existing research has already indicated that digital platforms use and mix institutional logics, particularly those of the market, the corporation, and the community, in novel ways, thereby creating field-level institutional misalignment (Frenken et al., 2020). Taking these arguments one step further, social media platforms can be expected to affect societal-level institutions given that they are widely used by citizens across the globe. Recent research has emphasized that institutional logics are maintained and changed through material practices which vary locally and create contradictions and tensions that challenge overarching institutional orders (e.g. Reay and Hinings, 2009; Smets, Morris, and Greenwood, 2012). Current dynamics of societal fragmentation and polarization can be better understood by adopting such a practice-lens on institutional logics that is sensitive to changes in interconnected ensembles of practices and associated meanings, changes in which are in part driven by technological innovations (Schildt and Kodeih, 2025). To further explore the societal effects of social media platforms, we analyze how YouTube - a key representative of a large, centralized, profit-oriented social media platform - uses institutional logics symbolically, in its narratives, and how this use differentiates from the actual ways in which the platform organizes its crowd.

3. Understanding core features of the YouTube platform

YouTube is the most renowned video-sharing platform worldwide and was founded as a for-profit technology startup by three former PayPal employees in February 2005, initially receiving venture capital funding. In 2006, the platform was acquired by Google for \$1.65 billion in stock and is now owned by Google's parent company, Alphabet. In June 2022, the upload rate exceeded 500 h of video per minute, amounting to approximately 30,000 h per hour (Statista, 2023). The consumption of digital content on YouTube increased by 40% between 2014 and 2020, with approximately 27% of global internet users engaged in 19 h of weekly online video viewing in 2022 (Statista, 2023). Regarding view time and number of users, YouTube is by far the largest social media platform on the internet in terms of video content and the second-largest search engine in the world, following Google.

Our selection of YouTube over other major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or TikTok is motivated by several distinctive characteristics that make it particularly illuminating for examining the strategic use of multiple institutional logics. First, YouTube functions simultaneously as a social media platform, a quasi-broadcasting service, an educational platform, and a professional content marketplace. Second, YouTube has evolved from a simple video-sharing website for amateur users to a complex ecosystem that mediates between multiple stakeholders: content creators, viewers, advertisers, and the platform itself. With its unprecedented capacity to reach billions of users globally, YouTube has become particularly attractive to businesses seeking to advertise their products and services. This is reflected in YouTube's advertising revenue, which reached \$36.15 billion in 2023 (Adgate, 2025). Third, while the social media platform functions as a quasi-public space where users create, share, and consume content, thus shaping the global distribution of information, it remains a proprietary system controlled by Alphabet Inc., using algorithms, policies, and governance structures that are largely opaque to external scrutiny. YouTube functions as both a provider of a critical public infrastructure enabling worldwide communication and an autonomous authority that establishes, monitors, and enforces policies, concentrating unprecedented power within one organization.

To analyze YouTube as an illustrative case for our research question, we employ a comprehensive secondary data analysis drawing upon multiple documentary sources. Our database incorporates publicly available corporate documents including Alphabet's annual reports and investor communications, YouTube's official policy documents and transparency reports, and platform governance updates. Additionally, we analyze academic literature on platform governance encompassing both YouTube-specific studies and broader research on social media platforms, complemented by media coverage. We structure our analysis of YouTube along three interconnected dimensions that reveal how it strategically deploys and subverts institutional logics. First, we examine YouTube's deliberate construction of digital marketplaces that promise entrepreneurial empowerment, analyzing how the platform articulates ideals of open digital spaces through its content creation infrastructure, monetization systems, and community-building affordances. This analysis shows how YouTube invokes both the market and the community logic to attract and retain users. Second, we investigate the platform's automated control mechanisms, focusing on how algorithmic management systems centralize control while maintaining the appearance of decentralized, merit-based competition. This analysis illustrates the fundamental contradiction between YouTube's curated narratives and its opaque, unilateral governance structures that concentrate decision-making power within proprietary algorithmic systems. Third, we scrutinize YouTube's profit-driven business model, examining how the platform's pursuit of market dominance and monopolistic positioning undermines the very market principles it purports to support.

3.1. Market creation: YouTube's promise of (entrepreneurial) empowerment

YouTube has evolved into a multifaceted social media platform that offers diverse formats for content creation and consumption, ranging from traditional long-form content such as documentaries, music videos, and tutorials to emerging formats like vlogs and video podcasts. The diversity of options to create and consume content has been further expanded through the launch of YouTube Shorts in July 2021, a response to TikTok's signature video format restricting content to a maximum duration of 60 s. By offering users agency over both the substance and form of their creative expression, YouTube strategically positions itself as a democratic marketplace for content creation and exchange, aiming to "give everyone a voice and show them the world" (YouTube, 2025).

Consistent with other social media platforms, YouTube enables the formation of different communities such as the LGBTQIA+ community that may experience limited social support in their offline environments but can develop a greater sense of social connectedness and collective self-esteem through engagement with LGBTQIA+ content creators (Bond and Miller, 2024). Social movements like Black Lives Matter have used social media platforms to organize, share information, raise awareness, and increase their impact (Mundt, Ross, and Burnett, 2018). By creating a digital public deliberation space, YouTube empowers decentralized actors to enter the digital public discourse and express their opinion through following channels or profiles, liking, or commenting on shared content. The comment sections in particular serve as spaces for information sharing, deliberative dialogue, and collective learning (Dubovi and Tabak, 2020). With the ability to post videos and host active comment sections, YouTube has been depicted as a communicative space enabling civic engagement on pressing issues like the ongoing climate crisis, enabling individuals and groups to organize beyond organizational and national boundaries (Uldam and Askanius, 2013).

YouTube emphasizes decentralized actors, merit-based competition, and profit-based exchange relationships, promising ostensibly limitless opportunities for both the consumption and the creation of content. The decentralization of actors is represented in the promise that everybody has an equal chance to create and share content, enabling individuals to gain potential financial remuneration upon achieving high levels of user engagement or going viral. This narrative has become more prevalent as content creation has evolved into a recognized occupational trajectory, particularly appealing to young individuals who increasingly view digital self-entrepreneurship as a legitimate and potentially lucrative career path (Burgess and Green, 2018; Gianna, 2022; Ting, 2024). A core attraction is YouTube's ability to aggregate users, which allows content creators to leverage the platform's technological infrastructure to reach and monetize a global audience (McKenzie, 2024; Postigo, 2016). By establishing features such as likes, shares, comments, and monetization opportunities, YouTube not only enables users to interact with content, but these features also signal compliance with market principles: competition appears meritocratic, value creation seems directly tied to the preferences of the content consuming crowd, and revenue generation follows market-determined worth. These metrics appear to objectively measure content value, popularity, and quality through viewer engagement, serving as "status markers" for content creators (Levina and Arriaga, 2014: 469). Visibility constitutes a critical prerequisite for commercial viability. To secure corporate sponsorships or access platform-mediated advertising revenue streams, content creators have to demonstrate the ability to capture the crowd's attention. Advertising is a key component of YouTube's monetization strategy, in which commercial viability is linked to content popularity. Users who want to watch content without advertisements have to purchase YouTube's premium subscription.

Like most social media platforms competing for active users and seeking to prevent them from switching to rival platforms, YouTube aims to attract and retain content creators by providing structured career paths on the platform. In contrast to other social media platforms, the YouTube Partner Program (YPP) represents a distinctive revenue-sharing model whereby the platform shares a percentage of revenue generated by advertisements shown on monetized content with its creators (Rieder, Borra, Coromina, and Matamoros-Fernández, 2023). Other revenue streams include the monetization of user engagement features like Super Chat, Super Sticker, channel memberships, and merchandise sales, where the revenue is shared between the content creator and YouTube. To be eligible for applying to the YPP and get access to more comprehensive monetization features, including participation in revenue generated from advertisements and user engagement, creators must have maintained compliance with YouTube's policies without prior violations and have at least 1000 subscribers, accompanied by either 4000 valid public watch hours accumulated over the previous 12 months or 10 million public Shorts views garnered in the preceding 90 days (Rieder et al., 2023).

Content with the highest earning potential comprises financial consulting (e.g., entrepreneurship tutorials, digital marketing strategies, investment advice), technological evaluations (e.g., consumer electronics, automotive reviews), aspirational lifestyle demonstrations (e.g., fashion displays, cosmetic applications), and self-improvement narratives (e.g., motivational discourse, culinary instruction, fitness regimens) (TubeBuddy, 2024). This popularity ranking is driven not only by user preferences, but also by advertisers who pay for placements where they believe their content will be best placed and reach the most viewers. An important metric for content creators to track and measure their success on YouTube is Revenue per Mille (RPM), i.e. the revenue per 1000 video views that the content creators receive. YouTube thus gives creators metrics that enable them to monitor their progress and quantify their success. Through parameters like subscriber counts, view statistics, engagement rates, and revenue data, creators gain tangible measures of their growth and audience development. This creates a sense of professional progression, allowing creators to set goals, measure achievements, and adapt their content strategies based on empirical feedback, thereby fostering the perception of a legitimate career path and autonomy in their work.

While YouTube ostensibly enables creator autonomy, offering multiple ways of monetization and user interaction, this facade of self-determination obscures the fundamental power asymmetry inherent in the platform's governance structure. The operational parameters, algorithmic decision-making processes, content distribution mechanisms, and monetization frameworks are unilaterally decided and implemented by YouTube. The platform's governance model embodies a significant contradiction: while the platform frames itself as an egalitarian marketplace, it simultaneously maintains authority over the rules, incentives, and distribution mechanisms that shape creator visibility, financial success, and audience accessibility (Bishop, 2019; Mattoni, Uldam, and Weinryb, 2025).

This centralization of control reveals YouTube's role as a market regulator, though not as a neutral arbiter but rather as an entity with proprietary and profit-driven interests, as we discuss in the next section.

3.2. Market regulation: Algorithmic management and its consequences

In contrast to state-based market regulation, where governmental authorities operate with broader public interest considerations rather than commercial motivations, YouTube simultaneously acts as a market facilitator that organizes and governs user interactions and as a profit-driven corporation pursuing its own commercial interests. This blending of roles contradicts democratic governance principles, particularly the separation of powers which maintains distinct boundaries between regulatory oversight and commercial interest. YouTube's regulatory decisions are inevitably influenced by its commercial objectives, creating potential conflicts of interest between fair market governance and profit maximization.

A key mechanism by which social media platforms exercise market regulation is through algorithmic management. Algorithms enable platforms to standardize governance operations across various groups of users, allowing decision-making authority to be centralized within their technical infrastructure rather than distributed across multiple actors. YouTube employs algorithms for a number of reasons. First, algorithms help to manage the vast number of user-generated content uploaded every day onto the platform. Second, they enable personalized content distribution mechanisms that match content with user preference profiles based on collected behavioral data (Bishop, 2019). Therefore, visibility is shaped through mechanisms like personalized search results, front-page layouts, and recommendations (Burgess and Green, 2018). For content creators, navigating these opaque algorithmic governance structures to achieve visibility is paramount, as it directly impacts their ability to aggregate audiences, gain opportunities, and make financial gains (Bishop, 2019).

However, navigating the algorithmic governance structure can prove difficult for users, as digital platforms like YouTube modify their algorithms in line with their current business objectives (Bucher, 2017, 2018). Moreover, YouTube's monetization algorithms tend to be biased in favor of already successful channels. An analysis by Dunna et al. (2022) found that channels with over 1 million subscribers experience lower rates of demonetization and higher rates of remonetization compared to smaller channels, indicating favoritism towards larger channels. In contrast to small channels, larger ones, despite facing demonetization, were more likely to regain their monetization status, allowing them to once again generate advertising revenue (Dunna et al., 2022; Ting, 2024).

YouTube's algorithmic bias also amplifies channels that disseminate harmful or problematic content. The amount of uploaded user-generated content combined with YouTube's recommendation algorithms that prioritize engagement over accuracy often promotes morally and ethically problematic content, such as the denial of the Holocaust, leading to YouTube being characterized as "one of the most powerful radicalizing instruments of the 21st century" (Tufekci, 2018). Individuals who disseminate hate speech, false information, or conspiracy theories use YouTube's comment section to employ specific (linguistic) strategies to promote their interpretation of evidence and negotiate and target specific values that correspond to their ideologies (Inwood and Zappavigna, 2023). Hawkins and Saleem (2023) examined 100 white nationalist videos shared on YouTube and discovered that calls for collective action appeared in at least 12% of these videos. These calls were motivated by the portrayal of common enemies and threats such as Muslims, immigrants, and feminists, and emphasized themes of white identity and perceived injustices faced by white individuals (Hawkins and Saleem, 2023). A study by Carrasco-Farré (2024) on the spread of misinformation on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that sources of misinformation create and use emotionally and morally charged narratives to promote crises and uncertainty. Although YouTube made efforts to reduce the visibility of extreme conspiracy videos by altering their recommendation algorithms, a study by Faddoul, Chaslot, and Farid (2020) found that conspiracy videos were still actively promoted on the platform.

While there are YouTube channels dedicated to countering misinformation and educating viewers on difficult topics, the platform's recommendation algorithms, which link videos based on keywords and topics, can accidentally promote extremist or conspiracy content alongside the videos addressing it, potentially leading users into dangerous echo chambers (O'Callaghan, Greene, Conway, Carthy, and Cunningham, 2015; Schmitt, Rieger, Rutkowski, and Ernst, 2018) and fostering polarization along ideological lines (Barberá, 2020; Levy, 2021). The vast amount of uploaded content presents YouTube with the challenge of ensuring timely removal of problematic content from its platform. An analysis by Goldstein, Edelson, McCoy, and Lauinger (2023) of the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol revealed that 90% of engagement with the original content occurred within the first 30 h, whereas YouTube only began deleting older, related content after one week. However, social media platforms not only facilitate the dissemination of misinformation but also enable the mobilization and organization of extremist communities like the right-wing movement where digital interactions are translated into large-scale and frequently violent protest actions (Odilla, 2025).

YouTube's role as both market creator and sole regulatory authority is ambiguous when it comes to addressing harmful content and misinformation. The algorithmic systems inadvertently exacerbate the very issues that the platform seeks to regulate through its policies and guidelines. The recommendation algorithms and engagement metrics, including likes, shares, and comments, are designed to maximize user interaction and viewing time, which often results in the amplification and further spreading of "toxic content" (Recuero, 2024). The result is a fundamental conflict of interest where YouTube's commercial objectives to maintain user engagement through algorithmic promotion directly undermine its regulatory responsibility to limit the spread of harmful content, highlighting the tensions that arise when a single entity serves as both profit-driven market facilitator and a regulatory body. The next section elaborates on how the platform monetizes this unique market position.

3.3. Market monetization: YouTube's proprietary business model

While YouTube demonstrably offers some creators opportunities to build audiences and generate revenue in line with its narrative

of equal chances, this partial fulfillment acts more as a strategic mechanism than an end in itself. By highlighting merit-based achievements and offering a glimpse of these promises, YouTube employs a user acquisition strategy to boost platform participation and establish network effects (Eisenmann, Parker, and Van Alstyne, 2006; Hagi and Wright, 2015). Achieving critical mass not only increases YouTube's value but also creates substantial switching costs, locking users onto the platform (Eisenmann, Parker, and Van Alstyne, 2011; Evans and Schmalensee, 2007). Generating network effects and obtaining critical mass constitute essential components of platform business models. These strategies are designed to consolidate markets, allowing digital platforms to capture the majority of market share and, ideally, secure a near-monopolistic market position.

Despite the carefully curated narratives deployed to attract users, these tactical approaches fundamentally represent anti-competitive behavior that contradicts market principles. YouTube's intense competition for every fraction of market share is underscored by its responses to threats from emerging social media platforms, particularly from TikTok's short-form video dominance (Hern, 2022). YouTube's strategic lobbying efforts to preserve its market position and user base have recently been documented in its successful exemption from Australia's under-16 social media ban (Taylor, 2025). The platform emphasized its educational value referring to popular children's content such as the Wiggles, demonstrating YouTube's strategic approach to regulatory challenges that threaten its commercial interests. While competitors like Meta, TikTok, and Snapchat remained subject to the ban, YouTube leveraged its market position to maintain regulatory advantages that directly protect its revenue streams and user engagement metrics among younger demographics.

With a business model reliant on the number of users and the intensity of engagement to succeed, YouTube aims to dominate markets as it favors monopolistic structures. In 2020, the Justice Department, along with the Attorneys General of California, Colorado, Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Virginia, filed a civil antitrust suit against Google, the parent company of YouTube. Website publishers as well as advertisers depend on search engines to sell and buy advertisements in order to reach potential customers. The complaint alleged that Google abused its power as a monopoly to dominate key digital advertising technologies (Kerr, 2023). This anti-market behavior centralizes power and exacerbates inequality between the platform and its users. With no real alternatives, numerous users who are becoming more and more economically dependent on the platform have no means to counteract YouTube's monopolistic power or unfair treatment and favoritism towards successful channels. YouTube's rhetorical positioning as a democratic marketplace stands in stark contrast to its operational strategy, which systematically pursues market concentration and structural dominance, undermining the conditions necessary for genuine market functionality.

4. How YouTube plays with institutional logics through strategic appropriation and selective subversion

Analyzing YouTube through the lens of institutional logics helps us to understand how the platform uses components of market, corporation, and community logics to construct a legitimating facade that obscures fundamental contradictions between the platform's narratives and its practices. Specifically, we find that YouTube engages in selective appropriation of these logics, extracting elements that serve its commercial interests while discarding principles that might constrain its market power. This selective appropriation becomes particularly evident in how YouTube adopts the vocabulary and symbolic elements of market competition and community empowerment while simultaneously implementing governance structures that systematically undermine these very principles. Through this process of strategic subversion, YouTube does not only "reinterpret, exploit, export, and change" (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 2) institutional logics to its advantage but dismantles and reconstructs them to create hybrid arrangements that appear to honor multiple logics while serving proprietary objectives.

4.1. The market logic: Between merit based career paths and proprietary marketplaces

The market logic emphasizes economic exchange, competition, financial metrics and growth, and has significantly spread across different societal domains (Joseph, Ocasio, and McDonnell, 2014; Lounsbury, 2007; Thornton et al., 2012). YouTube emphasizes its role as a transactional intermediary that aligns with the behavioral scripts of the market logic, prioritizing competition and professional success based on merit. The claimed democratization of content creation pretends that the decentralization of actors enables equal opportunities for all users, suggesting that success on the platform depends on the creator's talent, effort, and audience appeal rather than structural advantages. While users are presented with and encouraged to internalize the market logic, the platform's actual operations diverge substantially from market principles. Violating the meritocratic principles it espouses, YouTube creates a stratified system where initial success becomes self-reinforcing through algorithmic amplification.

It actively cocreates user preferences through its recommendation systems, prioritizing engagement over content quality. At the same time, there is no algorithm competition due to the strong, de-facto monopolistic market position of YouTube and the lack of platform interoperability that would allow competitors to offer alternative algorithms. The misalignment between narratives and practices is further evident in YouTube's creator compensation mechanisms. While the platform claims that revenue generation follows market principles, YouTube's revenue distribution follows its business model and revenue generation imperatives which prioritize metrics that enhance advertising value rather than content quality and merit. This creates a distorted incentive structure, where creator success depends less on producing valuable content for users and more on YouTube's advertising objectives. Niche, innovative, or specialized content, despite offering value to specific user communities, can become marginalized and demonetized when it lacks advertising potential (Romano, 2019).

The sociotechnical infrastructure that is decided and designed by YouTube grants the platform substantial control over information flows, centralizing power in ways that remain largely inaccessible to oversight by external actors such as state agencies, regulatory bodies, or civil society organizations. Such centralized control stands in stark contrast to democratic participation, emphasizing

algorithmic optimization rather than user choice, contradicting the platform's stated commitment to user-driven value creation. As demonstrated in the monopolization lawsuit against Google, YouTube's parent company controls the platform's rules, policies, and the algorithms that govern search and recommendation functions. This concentration of power in one of the world's largest tech corporations, combined with minimal regulation, raises significant concerns about fairness, transparency, and accountability. It contradicts the market logic YouTube ostensibly promotes, thereby undermining essential meanings and practices associated with the market logic itself given YouTube's vast societal reach. This contradiction carries implications beyond the platform itself. Functioning competitive markets constitute a foundational condition for democratic public spheres, as they enable editorial independence and media pluralism through distributed authority. When reach and control consolidates in the hands of a few tech corporations, the capacity for genuinely independent media coverage becomes increasingly precarious and contested, thereby undermining the informational diversity essential to robust democratic deliberation.

4.2. *The logic of the corporation: Centralized ownership and control*

While related to the logic of the market, the logic of the corporation is primarily characterized by rational decision-making processes, privileging formal procedures and hierarchical structures over the mutual cooperation characteristic of community-based organizing (Thornton et al., 2012). Unlike the market logic's emphasis on efficiency and competition, the logic of the corporation derives its legitimacy from formal organization, managerial authority, and adherence to bureaucratic procedures (Thornton et al., 2012; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008).

Despite YouTube's self-presentation as a neutral intermediary rather than a corporate entity, the platform's ownership structure reveals its alignment with the logic of the corporation. Owned by Alphabet Inc., Google's parent company and one of the largest technology conglomerates, YouTube relies on corporate governance structures in its host organization. At the same time, elements of the corporate logic also extends to the ways in which YouTube organizes its marketplace (Kirchner and Schuessler, 2019). When organizing the crowd, YouTube establishes hierarchical structures among its user base through algorithmic promotion systems that determine content visibility and creator success. The platform implements extensive regulatory mechanisms through community guidelines and terms of service, functioning as organizational rules that govern user conduct. Furthermore, YouTube exercises disciplinary authority through sanctions including channel demonetization, content removal, and exclusion from monetization programs, mirroring the sanctioning mechanisms found within formal organizations. Central to YouTube's organizational control is its sophisticated data collection and algorithmic mediation system, which monitors and leverages user-generated data to produce rankings and reward popular content and its creators. The impenetrability and opacity of these algorithmic systems indicate a power consolidation by a coding elite that controls digital production means and the exploitation of user-generated data, potentially creating a new social hierarchy (Burrell, 2016; Burrell and Fourcade, 2021; Pasquale, 2015). Moreover, it represents a form of organizational surveillance that enables the platform to direct user attention and consumption patterns.

Unlike in formal corporate structures that may be subject to various forms of institutional oversight or stakeholder negotiation, YouTube users lack reciprocal channels to challenge organizational decisions that affect their participation and livelihood. This asymmetrical relationship is further exacerbated by the centralization of decision-making authority within a single proprietary entity whose primary allegiance lies with commercial rather than community interests. State agencies, civil society organizations, or user collectives are not involved in platform governance decisions. Consequently, YouTube constitutes a perverse instantiation of the corporate logic wherein organizational control extends to decentralized actors who remain systematically excluded from the decision-making processes that govern their participation, creating an unprecedented concentration of organizational power without corresponding accountability mechanisms.

4.3. *The logic of the community: Digital tribes and polarized communities*

The logic of the community represents a distinct institutional order that diverges from both market and corporate logics in its core principles, prioritizing local embeddedness over global standardization. Rather than pursuing profit maximization as an organizational imperative, the community logic emphasizes mutual benefit and reciprocal exchange among members (Thornton et al., 2012). Legitimacy within the community logic does not result from market efficiency or bureaucratic rationality, but rather from community membership itself, shared identity formations, and demonstrated commitment to collective well-being (Almandoz, 2012; Marquis, Lounsbury, and Greenwood, 2011; Thornton et al., 2012). A core principle is the subordination of individual gain to collective welfare, wherein organizational and individual actions are evaluated through their contribution to communal well-being rather than personal advancement, emphasizing personal relationships and interpersonal trust over the impersonal, transactional exchanges characteristic of market-based interactions (Thornton et al., 2012).

Affording universal access to abundant information, combined with the ability for any user to generate content and algorithms that prioritize engagement over accuracy, YouTube facilitates not only the spread of misinformation but also the formation of clan-like structures. Here, many social media platforms function as accelerators of post-truth politics, normalizing so-called "alternative facts", conspiracy theories, and trolling behavior in political discourse, phenomena that have increased in the last decade (Hannan, 2023). The widespread adoption of trolling on social media platforms has influenced the democratic process beyond the boundaries of social media platforms, resulting in a phenomenon known as "government by trolling" where lawmakers introduce so-called "satirical bills" not intending to pass them, but rather to mock the opposing political party (Hannan, 2018). The principles of the community logic become blurred as the platform enables the organization of globally dispersed actors as well as local communities. Most critically, YouTube's practices directly contradict the community logic's principle of promoting collective well-being. Rather than fostering

beneficial outcomes for communities, the platform's algorithmic architecture and content recommendation and distribution mechanisms actively undermine societal cohesion by enabling the rapid dissemination of misinformation and amplifying extremist political agendas. This capacity to inflict harm on the very communities it purports to serve represents a fundamental subversion of community logic principles, transforming a mechanism ostensibly designed for collective benefit into a potential vector for social fragmentation and democratic erosion.

The polarization observed on YouTube points to a broader problem: the public discourse takes place in a digital arena governed by one of the “Big Five” American corporations. While recommendation algorithms polarize audiences along ideological lines, the more fundamental concern lies in how YouTube's proprietary business model, emphasizing user engagement and revenue optimization, shapes the structural conditions of democratic deliberation. The consolidation of power into the hands of one platform organization subjects global political discourse to the governance mechanisms, content policies, and commercial imperatives established by private entities, effectively situating public sphere functions within corporately managed environments. The resulting dynamic transcends mere polarization, encompassing the systematic organization of civic participation according to algorithmic systems designed primarily to serve proprietary rather than democratic objectives, thereby amplifying the market logic into spaces traditionally governed by principles of public discourse and democratic accountability.

This contradiction exemplifies the strategic use of institutional logics as resources by organizational actors (Durand et al., 2013; Thornton et al., 2012). YouTube leverages the market logic to attract creators and users while implementing practices that concentrate power and revenue. The platform's governance structure reveals the consequences of these proprietary digital spaces, ultimately leading to a perversion of the institutional logics they supposedly champion. This distortion creates a recursive cycle where the platform rhetorically deploys institutional logics to attract participants while simultaneously undermining those same principles through its governance practices. Table 1 summarizes the selective appropriation of categorical elements from the institutional logics of the market, corporation, and community by platform organizations. It demonstrates how these logics are strategically deployed to construct legitimacy while being subverted to advance the platform's objectives.

5. Towards alternatives? Decentralized arenas and distributed governance in the Fediverse

Despite their dominance, alternatives to centralized, commercial social media platforms exist. One example is Mastodon, a social media platform, which gained popularity following Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter in late October 2022 (Farrell, 2022). It is a part of the Fediverse, a decentralized, federated network of servers running social media software that enables cross-server communication through protocols like ActivityPub, ATProto (used by Bluesky), diaspora*, and OStatus (Livitckaia et al., 2023; Roscam Abbing, Diehm, and Warreth, 2023; Struett, Sinnreich, Aufderheide, and Gehl, 2024). Unlike centralized platforms controlled by a corporation, federated systems allow independent servers to connect based on open standards while maintaining local governance and moderation policies. The Fediverse offers social media services based on an open protocol approach that also lie at the heart of services such as e-mail or the internet itself. In contrast to YouTube, the Fediverse did not emerge as a commercial organization but has instead evolved through the contributions of multiple developers, with key figures including Evan Prodromou who created the early microblogging platform Identi.ca (2008) and co-authored the ActivityPub protocol, and Eugen Rochko who popularized the Fediverse through Mastodon. The governance structure of the Fediverse is decentralized across multiple levels. At the instance level, individual server administrators establish their own content policies and moderation rules. At the platform level, open-source software developers

Table 1
YouTube's selective appropriation and strategic subversion of institutional logics.

	Selective appropriation	Strategic subversion
Logic of the market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meritocratic rhetoric of equal opportunity ● Competition-based success narratives ● Engagement metrics as indicators of value (views, likes, subscribers) ● Entrepreneurial career pathways and success milestones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Algorithmic bias favouring established channels ● Opaque recommendation algorithms ● Demonetization practices of smaller creators ● Monopolistic market practices and anti-competitive behavior ● Revenue distribution prioritizing advertising value
Logic of the corporation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Professional management structures and career progression frameworks ● Standardized procedures through community guidelines and terms of service ● Data-driven decision making and performance metrics ● Bureaucratic processes for monetization eligibility (YPP requirements) ● Formal organizational hierarchies among creator tiers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unilateral control without reciprocal accountability mechanisms ● Algorithmic governance extending corporate control to non-employees ● Opaque decision-making processes hidden from external scrutiny ● Absence of user participation in governance decisions ● Disciplinary authority without due process or appeal mechanisms ● Surveillance infrastructure disguised as analytics tools
Logic of the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Democratic participation narrative ● Community building and engagement features (comments, subscriptions, sharing) ● Support for marginalized groups and social movements ● Collaborative content creation and user interaction tools ● Platform as digital public sphere for civic engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Algorithmic amplification of polarizing content ● Facilitation of misinformation and conspiracy theories ● Commodification of community interactions for advertising revenue ● Corporate control over supposedly democratic discourse spaces

maintain platforms such as Mastodon and guide technical development through community-driven processes. At the protocol level, standards such as ActivityPub or ATProto, maintained by broader developer communities, ensure interoperability across the network.

Compared to YouTube, there is no mismatch between the narrative use of institutional logics and the way the platform is organized. Instead, the logics of community, corporation and market are brought into conversation with each other. While the community logic shapes the platform's infrastructure, this infrastructure facilitates markets and is open to use by corporations. This interplay of logics manifests in different ways.

First, the Fediverse encompasses networks of decentralized applications designed to replicate the functionality of dominant commercial social media platforms while operating on federated architecture. Mastodon functions as a decentralized microblogging service providing an alternative to X (formerly Twitter), while PeerTube offers video hosting leveraging peer-to-peer technology as a counterpart to YouTube. Image-sharing and social networking are facilitated through Pixelfed (comparable to Instagram) and Friendica (analogous to Facebook), respectively. Not just because decision-making authority and enforcement are distributed among diverse actors, but also because of competition between various instances based upon shared but open, non-proprietary protocols, one could argue that the Fediverse embodies the market logic more authentically than YouTube's monopolistically centralized control.

Second, rather than concentrating power and data extraction within a single corporation, the Fediverse distributes governance across decentralized instance operators, open-source developers, and people who maintain the protocols. Given the protocols' openness, operators and developers dissatisfied with protocol development always have the power to depart ("fork") and pursue alternative trajectories. This commons-based architecture is an alternative draft to the corporate logic of centralized platforms, restraining the decision-making authority of focal actors as well as the possibility to commercially exploit platform ownership. Additionally, distributed governance structures reduce vulnerability to lobbying from influential state and corporate actors, since no single entity possesses sufficient power to unilaterally determine the rules and policies of the platform.

Third, in contrast to YouTube, whose advertising driven model can constrain the ideas creators might want to express, decentralized social networks de-emphasize commercial exploitation (Gehl, 2015; La Cava, Greco, and Tagarelli, 2021). This architectural difference directly impacts privacy and security: centralized systems consolidate all user data under the control of a single corporate entity, whereas the federated model of decentralized platforms distributes data across numerous independent servers, granting users greater autonomy and control (La Cava et al., 2021).

Fourth, the Fediverse's distributed architecture enables multiple communities to establish their own moderation rules and content policies while participating in a shared networked ecosystem, supporting the core idea of the community logic in that individual interests are less prone to become dominant (Zulli, Liu, and Gehl, 2020).

Fifth, while the engagement-maximizing algorithms of centralized social media platforms allow extremist groups to form and globally recruit users into clan-like communities, the more transparent and user-curated information flows in decentralized systems mitigate such efforts, for example by block-lists of extremist communities (Zhang et al., 2025). In addition, devoid of distortions of algorithmic sorting mechanisms, fediverse-based services bear the potential of promoting a more diverse exposure to content and viewpoints (La Cava et al., 2021).

While the Fediverse presents an organizational alternative to centralized, profit-oriented social media platforms like YouTube, its long-term success and ability to foster positive civic discourse is contested. Through historical analysis of earlier digital communication platforms and critical internet studies, Struett et al. (2024) identify challenges that undermine the Fediverse's potential. These include accountability gaps exemplified by the Log4j vulnerability in widely-used open-source software, where security flaws remained undetected for years. Software "forking" can lead to fragmentation and incompatibility, as seen in the OpenOffice versus LibreOffice split, while corporate entities may subvert open standards, as demonstrated by the implementation of Electronic Media Extensions (EME) in web browsers. Moreover, commercial entities may co-opt the open nature of the Fediverse by adding proprietary value-added features to attract users, creating "walled gardens" that limit interoperability despite using open protocols, and gradually centralizing user data and control for profit. Access issues may prevent broad and inclusive adoption. These barriers include complexity and perceived difficulty for new users creating a "user-friendliness" gap, gatekeeping by established users through norms policing or technical jargon (e.g., techno-elitism), and the "friendliness paradox", whereby making platforms easier to join, such as defaulting to a large instance, might ultimately undermine decentralization and user agency. Content moderation presents comparable challenges in decentralized environments as in conventional social media platforms, as evidenced by right-wing extremist and conspiracy networks utilizing PeerTube, a Fediverse platform, to organize communities within German-speaking regions (Gerster, Arcostanzo, Prieto-Chavana, Hammer, and Schwieter, 2023).

While the Fediverse is not a panacea, it offers a foundation for reimagining social media platforms. The Fediverse case demonstrates that social media platforms can be structured around principles of community governance, collaborative development, and user agency, configurations wherein power is diffused among participants rather than concentrated in the hands of a few platform owners.

6. Discussion

Our study aimed at better understanding of how a specific form of platform organization - large, centralized and profit-driven social media platforms - contributes to challenging liberal-capitalist, democratic societies. To pursue this aim, we connected research on platform organization and governance with the institutional logics perspective. Existing research already pointed to platforms' selective use of institutional logics, especially those of the market, the corporation and the community, and highlighted their potential to re-shape and undermine these logics, particularly the logic of the state (Frenken et al., 2020). Our research builds on and extends this research by shifting the focus away from locally embedded gig working platforms to social media platforms with a global reach.

By studying YouTube as an illustrative case, we show that large, centralized, commercial social media platforms selectively draw on

the logics of the market, the community and the corporation and thereby gain widespread legitimacy. YouTube communicates its alignment with principles of the market logic when engaging with its users, enabling user self-promotion, implementing reputation systems through likes and engagement metrics, and ostensibly facilitating open market competition among content creators. These commitments are partially fulfilled, thereby sustaining user participation. Simultaneously, YouTube invokes the community logic by emphasizing values of creative self-expression and the expansive opportunities for interpersonal connection across the platform for all users, including those without profit motives. Yet, YouTube's primary goals are to generate revenue, maximize its user base, and consequently monopolize markets. Instead of fostering communities based on reciprocity and mutual respect, YouTube functions as an accelerator and megaphone of individual self-expression. Engagement metrics of social media platforms are content-agnostic amplification triggers: whether users like, share, or comment to endorse or denounce content, these interactions fuel the algorithmic recommendation and distribution of content independent of the valence of engagement. This conflation of engagement with approval creates new forms of consensus where shared meaning emerges not from collective agreement but from the algorithmic imposition of visibility.

Stalder (2018) diagnosed that the “digital condition” implies both the development of new forms of participation and commons-based organizing and a disruption of the liberal, democratic world order under the banner of liberalism and rationality. We argue that centrally organized, profit-driven social media platforms contribute to these developments. These platforms mix a highly rationalized facade with the invisible hand of algorithms (Rahman, 2021) to produce outcomes that can be anti-scientific, anti-market, anti-democratic and a-moral. By positioning themselves as neutral intermediaries, delegating tasks to algorithms, and technically allowing the creation of fake personas and bots with a potentially huge reach and social influence, dominant social media platforms obscure their actorhood and accountability, while taking over state-like regulatory functions. Thus, while ostensibly espousing commitment to the logics of the market, the community and the corporation, these platforms in fact lack a commitment to the norms and agreements underpinning liberal-capitalist, democratic societies.

Instead of being neutral arbiters of diverse societal voices, social media platforms are “gatekeepers, censors and architects of public discourse - often steered by corporate interests and the ideological whims of their billionaire owners” (Beckedahl, 2025, own translation). However, alternative forms of platform organization exist. In our study, we sketched the example of the ‘Fediverse’ as one of several alternatives marked by decentralization and distributed, open governance. Fostering community-based, decentralized social media platforms may be a way of fostering political democracy if conditions of platform interoperability are met (Vergne, 2025). While we think it is unlikely that large, profit-driven and centralized social media platforms such as YouTube will adopt principles of the Fediverse, our study highlights that key organizational dimensions such as ownership and distributed governance as well as a diversity of organizational forms are key avenues for circumventing the concentration of power that often accompanies private ownership, and for creating checks and balances for platform owners that otherwise simultaneously act as rule-makers, executors, and arbiters. A diverse social media landscape is a fundamental prerequisite for a democratic public sphere where genuine competition is possible. Given that independent media serves as a core pillar of a functioning democracy, the centralization of control over information flows within a few platform organizations challenges democratic principles.

Our study contributes to ongoing debates on digital platforms and institutional logics in several ways. First, by shifting our analysis from gig work platforms operating on a national or field-level to globally operating social media platforms, we show how platforms' hybrid use of institutional logics (Frenken et al., 2020; Grabher and König, 2020; Watkins and Stark, 2018; Zhang et al., 2025) has repercussions for the public sphere. Hence, we support critical analyses of platforms' regulatory power (e.g. Lehdonvirta, 2022), complementing these analyses with an organization-theoretical perspective that shows how the governance of the platform host organization extends to the ways in which platforms organize crowds, yielding them significant power to play with and undermine societal-level institutional logics given their influence over the public sphere.

Second, we respond to recent calls for using the institutional logics framework to understand current challenges to the liberal-capitalist, democratic institutional order (Lounsbury and Wang, 2020), revealing the role played by certain kinds of platforms in undermining its institutional pillars. While symbolically adopting the rhetoric of the logic of the market, the corporation and the community to gain legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), large, centralized and profit-driven social media platforms decompose the means and ends of these logics in the specific ways in which they create, regulate and monetize markets (Yan et al., 2021), thereby redefining not just the composition of dominant logics in society, but also their meanings and associated practices (Schildt and Kodeih, 2025). Arguably, platforms' strategic and subversive use of institutional logics is possible and impactful because users lack situated interaction possibilities in digital spaces. Such interactions are an important source of resistance to a manipulative use of institutional logics, because they allow detecting and acting upon a lack of coherence in logics (Zilber, 2024).

Our analysis clearly has some limitations and points to important avenues for further research. First, we focused only on three institutional logics (market, community, corporations), those that are closely aligned with questions of governance and organization. Yet, to fully understand platforms' role in transforming liberal-capitalist, democratic societies, we also need to attend to the logic of the state, which is challenged and captured by platforms (Frenken et al., 2020; Lehdonvirta, 2022), and the logics of family and religion, which are given a stage on digital platforms. Second, while we see the challenges to liberal and democratic ideals, we blended out the inherent flaws of liberal-capitalist, democratic society, such as its excessive decoupling between aspired ideals and actual practices, and its role in driving societal and environmental problems, particularly during its neoliberal phase (Delmestri & Schuessler, 2025). Hence, while we advocate for a maintenance of liberal-democratic ideals, we also see a need to redefine liberal-capitalist, democratic institutions in a way that is more aligned with communitarian ideals (Etzioni, 2000, 2009). Arguably, such a refinement is necessary to widely legitimate and institutionalize platforms resembling fediverse or cooperative structures - while, in turn, such platforms can play a role in strengthening communitarian ideals. However, further research is needed to better understand the challenges of institutionalizing and diffusing such alternative platforms as a way of fostering logics diversity - recently recognized as crucial for a resilient

society (Almandoz and Thornton, 2025). Third, our analysis of the interface between platform governance, institutional logics and societal changes remained on quite a high level of analysis, focusing only on one illustrative case. Further research could build on prior research on the decomposition and strategic use of institutional logics (Yan et al., 2021; Durand et al., 2013), fleshing out more systematically how the decoupling between narratives and platform-mediated practices changes the meanings and associated practices of dominant logics in different parts of society and different contexts. Such research could also attend to how platforms' strategic and manipulative use of institutional logics can be resisted (Zilber, 2024).

Our institutional perspective provides a complement to existing, top-down oriented calls for stricter platform regulation, which remain limited precisely because of platforms' close entanglement with the state and their by now crucial infrastructural functions. Germany's Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) exemplifies this limitation. While it mandates the removal of unlawful content, its practical impact is constrained by enforcement challenges and the platforms' capacity to adapt their technical structures to minimize regulatory constraints. Despite stringent provisions, the persistence of hate speech on German social media reveals a critical governance gap: national regulations struggle to address the inherently transnational architecture of platforms (e.g., Hanfeld, 2022). This regulatory-technological asymmetry suggests that legislative frameworks like NetzDG function more as symbolic gestures towards platform accountability than effective mechanisms for protecting democratic discourse, as platforms maintain the capacity to shape implementation in ways that preserve their operational autonomy while creating an appearance of compliance. An institutionalist perspective on the platform organization could hereby more closely investigate whether and how digital platforms are engineering new forms of legitimacy where traditional mechanisms of meaning-making and norm formation are replaced by the algorithmic management of what becomes socially acceptable.

In sum, we argue that if corporations control the markets and public infrastructures that they organize under the banner of community, we see a toxic melange of institutional logics that challenges the core pillars of liberal-capitalist, democratic society. We urgently need to think about alternative ways of organizing platforms as both a means and end of a reformed liberal-democratic society.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Elke Schuessler: Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Sara Maric:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Leonhard Dobusch:** Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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