Actually existing platformization: Embedding platforms in urban spaces through partnerships

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the partnership as a heterogeneous boundary resource that enables platforms to generate dependencies, become locally embedded, and gain power in urban settings. Pushing back against narratives of platform-driven disruption, which tend to universalize and totalize platform power, we discuss three cases of what we term "actually existing platformization" – a path-dependent and locally situated process in which platform companies engage in various forms of "boundary work" with other actors seeking to retain and/or gain power. Each case focuses on a distinct industry: food delivery, short-term housing rental, and the social/voluntary sector. In each of these domains, we show how asset-light platforms initiate and develop partnerships as a frequently nebulous boundary resource that opens up potential avenues for 1) market consolidation, 2) logistical integration, 3) social mobilization, and/or 4) institutional legitimation. Such strategic moves, we argue, have become particularly pertinent following the Covid-19 pandemic, which has hit urban areas particularly hard and is intensifying certain social dependencies and institutional shortcomings that platforms are seeking to exploit.

Introduction

Platforms are restless, roving entities. They shift shapes, are subject to experimentation, and expand whenever the opportunity arises, thereby calling into question established (b)orders and modes of conduct. Platforms are built for domination dressed up as empowerment. They offer spaces for social and economic exchange, which are then optimized for purposes of rent-seeking and data extraction. Yet things often do not go as planned and platforms also struggle to rise above their dependencies, seeking to turn these into their advantage. The struggle to overcome material, situated dependencies is what sets one platform apart from another, despite sharing certain qualities. It is also what sets each platform apart from itself, as it splits into differently operating interfaces to meet the distinct requirements of particular locales (e.g. Airbnb Amsterdam is not identical to Airbnb San Francisco). Accordingly, platformization is never monolithic. It is a *path-dependent* process that is institutionally embedded in national and urban settings.

Over the last two and a half years, our Platform Labor research project has tried to get a grip on this path-dependency through a set of cross-national comparative studies that examine how platforms are transforming labor, social reproduction and urban governance in Amsterdam, Berlin and New York. As the project has reached its halfway point, we take this moment as an opportunity to reflect on some of our findings and draw preliminary inferences. These findings are derived from three subprojects, each of which focuses on one particular area of platformization. Subproject 1, led by Van Doorn, examines the rise and impacts of on-demand labor platforms in low-wage service industries, especially food delivery and domestic cleaning. Subproject 2, led by Bosma, investigates the uneven distribution of opportunities and challenges related to urban short-term rental (STR) markets, concentrating on the most dominant STR platform: Airbnb. Subproject 3, led by Mos, studies the emergence of what we call "postwelfare platforms" against a background of ongoing welfare state transformations and experimentation with local, often volunteer-driven forms of care provision.

While the three subprojects tackle specific questions in contiguous socioeconomic domains, we are beginning to identify a number of shared dynamics and operative logics, even as these are differentially articulated across the three abovementioned cities. In this contribution, we concentrate on one common feature of platformization whose prevalence, we believe, deserves more critical attention – especially in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and its eventual aftermath. In each of our subprojects, we have identified an operative logic by which asset-light – or what Srnicek (2017) calls "lean" – platform companies and initiatives seek to leverage particular "boundary resources" required for the urban expansion of their multisided markets and socio-political influence.

As Helmond, Nieborg and Van der Vlist (2019: 124) have shown in their pioneering study of Facebook, the platform has managed to evolve and expand its power by deploying two types of resources that allow it to perform "boundary work": technical resources such as application programming interfaces (APIs) and software development kits (SDKs), through which it can strategically "orient its programmability" toward developers and businesses, and "partnership strategies to connect and integrate with organizations worldwide that are leading in other markets and industries." Here we are particularly interested in the partnership as a strategic device and heterogeneous boundary resource that may enable platforms to generate "dependencies, become embedded, and gain power in other [public and private] domains" (Helmond, Nieborg, and Vlist 2019: 125). As we will argue, it is through the technique of partnership-building that selected domains and stakeholder groups can – like web data – be made “platform-ready” (Helmond 2015). This means that, as these groups interact with platforms and seek to mobilize them to their advantage (or attempt to minimize their adverse impacts), such interactions are frequently shaped by platform protocols, interfaces, and business interests. Yet these are, in turn, sensitive to local norms, stakeholder objectives and policy frameworks, which explains the path-dependency of what we call – borrowing from Brenner and Theodore’s (2002) conceptual framework – “actually existing platformization”.

Analogous to how the notion of “actually existing neoliberalism” entails spatially uneven processes of neoliberalization that materialize “through trial-and-error experimentation” (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009: 52), actually existing platformization highlights “the complex, contested ways in which [platform business] strategies interact with pre-existing uses of space, institutional configurations, and constellations of sociopolitical power” (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009: 54). Moreover, both neoliberalization and platformization take shape by acting on and through cities, conceived as spaces for economic innovation and growth (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009: 57; Stehlin, Hodson, and McMeekin 2020). In what follows, we discuss three examples of actually existing platformization in three distinct industries: food delivery, short-term housing rental, and the social/voluntary sector. In each of these industries, all concentrated in urban areas, we show how asset-light platforms initiate and develop partnerships as a multifarious and frequently nebulous boundary resource that opens up potential avenues for 1) market consolidation, 2) logistical integration, 3) social mobilization, and/or 4) institutional legitimation. Such strategic moves, which we will further explain below, have become particularly pertinent following the Covid-19 pandemic. While the pandemic has severely disrupted some industries as well as the households that depend on them, it has also created new prospects for opportunistic platforms that, like other actors shaping actually existing neoliberalism, never let a crisis go to waste (Van Doorn, Bosma & Mos 2020).

Delivering good: How DoorDash attempts to build “the ‘next’ normal”

As Helmond, Nieborg and Van der Vlist note (2019: 124), “partnerships are an essential entry point for tracing a platform’s evolution and its shifting boundaries.” While a full account of DoorDash’s evolution toward becoming the largest food delivery platform in the US is beyond the scope of this contribution (Abril 2019), we highlight two programs through which the company has sought to enroll a variety of partners in efforts to expand its platform business beyond commercial food delivery and – when Covid-19 hit the restaurant industry – to consolidate control over its multisided market: Project DASH and Main Street Strong. We pay particular attention to how these programs operate in New York City, where Van Doorn first encountered DoorDash. At the time (2018), the company was still struggling to get a strong foothold in this competitive market, but major capital injections from Softbank and other investors enabled its acquisition of local delivery favorite Caviar, thereby boosting its market share (Upton 2019).

As the days of moving fast and breaking things are waning in an era of heightened critical scrutiny, it has been crucial for DoorDash to accompany its rapid growth with what Shestakofsky and Kelkar (2020) call "relationship labor". Such labor does not only seek to gain consent from platform users but also includes boundary work in the form of partnership-driven public relations initiatives. For example, DoorDash introduced Project DASH at the start of 2018 to "facilitate deliveries for food recovery organizations connecting donated surplus food to hunger relief nonprofits".[1] Essentially, this program spearheads the company's social impact strategy, which is said to prioritize "long-term partnerships that leverage logistics to support communities in innovative ways". As the Covid-19 pandemic hit the US in March 2020, DoorDash saw an opportunity to expand the ambit of Project DASH beyond food recovery.

In April 2020, the company announced its national partnership with United Way, connecting it with the nonprofit's large network of social service organizations "to reach people in need by using DoorDash's last-mile logistics platform and community of Dashers, powering deliveries to at-risk and food-insecure homes".[2] In New York, where the pandemic has had particularly devastating consequences – especially for people of color, DoorDash also initiated local partnerships. For example, it partnered with the city's Department of Education to deliver meals to medically fragile students forced to stay home during the lockdown (Knudson 2020), while partnering with Mount Sinai Health System for the donation of so-called *DashPass* subscriptions offering "unlimited free delivery fees to its 42,000 healthcare employees" (Krisel 2020).

It should be noted here that these free subscriptions were scheduled to last for 60 days, after which new customers would start paying regular fees, because it tells us something about how the social impact goals of the company's Project DASH program intersect with its longer term commercial objectives. By positioning itself as a responsible partner ready to provide an "essential service" in a destabilized city looking for logistical solutions to its public health crisis, and by offering this service for free or at reduced rates to selected communities for the duration of this crisis, DoorDash seeks to suture its platform into a ruptured urban fabric where institutions struggle to meet social reproductive needs. In the process, it also gathers data on new (potential) customer groups and their consumption patterns, which may generate useful insights when developing new services in the wake of the pandemic.

Cultivating good relations with local governments is a crucial aspect of this strategy. As a case study by public affairs software company Quorum (which has DoorDash as its client) explains: "By introducing their policy team to many officials for the first time in a moment of support and community relations, DoorDash also expects to be able to more easily have conversations with these officials in the future about the issues their team focuses on outside of coronavirus".[3] In New York, public officials have pushed back against the activities of DoorDash and other gig platforms, particularly with respect to how they pay their workers (Lieber 2019) and how much they charge restaurants (Nylen and Nieves 2020). In this light, it makes sense that DoorDash complemented Project DASH with the initiation of another partnership-driven program: Main Street Strong.

Main Street Strong is marketed as "a suite of products, programs and policies […] to help restaurants reimagine and grow their business into the new future" – a "'next' normal" DoorDash aims to build.[4] One such product is Storefront, developed in partnership with a food ordering software startup, which integrates with the DoorDash API and lets small restaurants create their own digital storefronts from which they can offer delivery – fulfilled by DoorDash – while paying no set-up, subscription, or merchant delivery fees until the end of 2020. Presented as a solution that could save struggling restaurants by "driving sales" and opening them up to new customers, Storefront also invites non-partner restaurants into DoorDash's platform domain, where their transactional data is captured and they would start paying service fees by 2021. The temporary revocation of such fees during the pandemic is thus a policy aimed at expanding DoorDash's market share, while it also pro-actively responds to pending commission caps in several cities including New York (Nylen and Nieves 2020).

Besides market expansion, Main Street Strong is also said to support DoorDash's existing restaurant partners during the pandemic. For example, the company partnered with fintech startup BlueVine to create a customized Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan application for partner restaurants, intended to expedite an otherwise cumbersome process.[5] The company also initiated a partnership with Kiva, a microfinance nonprofit, in which it pledged to match each 0% interest loan that partnered restaurants manage to crowdsource through Kiva's platform.[6] This initiative is exclusively targeted at Black- and migrant-owned businesses, which are provided with "capital as a capacity-building resource" as part of DoorDash's broader professed "commitment to supporting Black communities" in response to the murder of George Floyd. There is, however, reason to question the sincerity of this commitment. As DoorDash seeks to consolidate its platform power through partnership-formation in the name of empowerment and inclusion, the company's mostly migrant and minority "delivery partners" – Dashers – have largely been ignored during this crisis (Glickman 2020). Framed as "essential workers" during the pandemic in order to avoid a service stop, these "partners" are ultimately disposable to DoorDash because the company knows it can depend on a steady supply of Black and Brown labor, particularly in New York and other large cities.

From partnerships to portals: How Airbnb seeks to automate city partnerships

In September 2020, Airbnb launched the *Airbnb City Portal*. While the portal is still in a pilot phase at the time of writing, Airbnb explains that it is intended to provide cities access to data on local Airbnb activity, tools for enforcing regulations, and direct communication channels to the platform.[7] As such, the portal is ostensibly "a first-of-its-kind solution for communities partnering with Airbnb". Despite this allusion to innovativeness, however, the company's push to initiate partnerships is not new: Airbnb has conducted this kind of boundary work since at least 2014, when it established its first European partnership with the city of Amsterdam.[8] What *is* new about Airbnb's *City Portal* is that it aims to minimize the relationship labor required to establish and maintain partnerships with cities, while casting regulation as a collaborative product rather than an outside threat.

As Airbnb's future growth is contingent on favorable regulations that allow short-term rental, the company has had to assume a proactive role as a "regulatory entrepreneur" (Van Doorn 2020) in response to cities seeking to curb problems associated with holiday apartments. In a context where partial or even full bans of short-term rentals are a real threat (as happened in Berlin in 2016, see O'Sullivan (2018)), city partnerships are a key strategy for securing the platform's access to rental properties and, in the company's words, should "help governments better understand—and build more trust with—Airbnb, which benefits hosts".[9]

The history of interaction between Amsterdam and Airbnb shows that partnerships can be ill-defined and ambiguous arrangements. The formal terms of agreement between both parties were articulated in a non-binding 'Memorandum of Understanding' (MOU) and a subsequent 'Agreement'. Prefiguring the ostensibly new *City Portal*, these documents included deals on taxation, communication efforts related to local regulations, and Airbnb's (limited) cooperation in sanctioning offenses (City of Amsterdam & Airbnb Ireland 2014;

2016). However, the precise meaning and scope of a city partnership beyond what's stipulated in the documents is difficult to determine. For Airbnb, their primary purpose seems to be to confer a measure of institutional legitimacy, for instance by having the 2016 Agreement open with the statement that "Amsterdammers are allowed to rent out their own home to tourists in a way that is safe, fair and quiet" (City of Amsterdam & Airbnb Ireland 2016). Without having a legally binding meaning, this statement portrays Airbnb's business as legitimate by default and shifts the discussion away from *a priori* restrictions toward a debate on what constitutes "safe, fair and quiet."

Moreover, while "partnership" may sound amicable, it is also a site of contestation. Partnerships crystallize often tense negotiations over regulation, which came to a halt when, in 2018, Airbnb was no longer willing to partner with Amsterdam following the city's decision to reduce the yearly rental cap from 60 to 30 days (Lomas 2018). Interestingly, however, the taxation agreement that was a component of the partnership remained intact, suggesting that some stakes of the arrangement were too high to forfeit. Indeed, zooming in on this aspect of the partnership gives us a better sense of how it operates as a boundary resource that generates a structural dependency on the side of the city through a process of "generative entrenchment" (Bratton 2015).

On an infrastructural level, Airbnb's collection of tourist taxes forms a step toward logistically integrating the company's platform into Amsterdam's tax collection system. Taking on functions previously undertaken by governments has been a common strategy for other platforms as well, including for example Facebook developing internet infrastructure (Plantin et al. 2018). Tax collection appears to be central to Airbnb's wider city-(inter)facing initiatives: besides anchoring Airbnb's pioneering partnership with Amsterdam, it was the first of four policy "options" in Airbnb's Policy Tool Chest[10] and is again promoted under the umbrella of the recently launched *City Portal*. Cities that opt in receive all due tourist taxes in a 'frictionless' manner, but also face high costs when seeking to perform this function without Airbnb's assistance – allowing the company to leverage this dependency. Indeed, the Amsterdam Court of Auditors recently warned the Amsterdam City Council that the city was too reliant on platform companies for collecting tourist taxes from short-term rentals.[11]

By integrating municipal tax collection into its platform, Airbnb is also looking to establish a long-term financial relation with cities – a relation that seems likely to become more important in light of the Covid pandemic. In 2020, Amsterdam lost 58% (€116 million) of its income from tourist taxes (Parool 2020). Alluding to the problematic situation that cities like Amsterdam are facing, Airbnb's Head of Global Policy and Communications Chris

Lehane has claimed that, with its *City Portal*, the company has “a more powerful economic empowerment story than it's ever had” (Sisson 2020). Yet it is not just the missing tourist revenues that reinforce Airbnb’s value proposition to cities. The economic empowerment story Airbnb communicates to its partners also hinges on valuable data access: “We have more travel data than just about any platform in the world, and that’s really significant” (Lehane in Sisson 2020). Besides being a potentially valuable resource for (municipal) tourism agencies seeking to recuperate lost revenues, access to this data also forms a condition of possibility for the successful enforcement of local regulations (Ferreri and Sanyal 2018).

Importantly, while regulation can present a threat to “disruptive” platforms, Airbnb is now attempting to create customized “regulatory products” that abet its own activities under the guise of partnering. In a vacancy for a software engineer, the company’s *City Portal* is presented as “a regulatory product platform that allows us to offer product solutions to cities around the world that are based on our policy objectives […] with minimal to no engineering effort” on Airbnb’s side.[12] Cities might resist using such a platform as long as they have the resources to develop and enforce regulations themselves, but if these are lacking then Airbnb’s *City Portal* may prove to be an attractive option. For Airbnb, meanwhile, the portal presents an opportunity to increase its infrastructural integration with strategically important cities and thereby consolidate its global market dominance, without having to engage in the kind of volatile relationship labor that partnerships otherwise require.

In order to have maximum access to rental properties, it is crucial for Airbnb to minimize the friction that is bound to accompany its partnerships with city administrations. Its *City Portal* helps to achieve this aim, by partly automating this type of partnership and rendering it an essentially technical affair, shifting away from the type of contentious policy negotiations that were required to establish the initial agreements. In light of the damage to urban (tourism) economies caused by the pandemic, such a technocratic partnership format may seem much more palatable than before. But increasing infrastructural integration with platforms, not only pertaining to regulation but also economic recovery, may set cities on a track of “corporate path dependency that cannot easily be undone or diverted” (Kitchin 2014: 10), and ultimately serves private rather than public interests.

The platformization of the social sector: How NLvoorelkaar becomes a welfare partner

Next to the abovementioned industries, digital platforms play an increasing role in the social sector – especially in the arrangement of paid and unpaid care services that sustain processes of social reproduction. In this section, we focus on the partnership-building strategies of volunteering platforms, which digitally match the supply and demand of voluntary support for citizens in need. In the Netherlands, the volunteering platform NLvoorelkaar (roughly translated: "Netherlands for each other") aims to connect citizens to social welfare and civil society organizations, while also organizing 'peer-to-peer' social care by matching citizens among each other. The Netherlands provides a particularly interesting context to study this under-researched type of platform. First, the turn to the Dutch "participation society" and the concurrent refugee crisis of 2015, followed more recently by the Corona pandemic, spurred the provision of voluntary care and provided ample room for these platforms to expand their reach. Second, this turn to a participation society simultaneously entailed a process of political decentralization in the Netherlands, which made local governments responsible for the provision of social care and thereby spurred the search for new social partners (Van Bochove et al. 2018).

Traditionally, local governments have contracted with "Volunteering Centers" (Vrijwilligerscentrales) to organize volunteering work. While these Centers continue to exist, the turn to a decentralized participation society has opened up opportunities for new (private) social service providers – including platform companies – to act as social partners. As explained below, the volunteering platform NLvoorelkaar does not replace but rather *merges with* existing volunteering and welfare infrastructures, presenting itself as a new institutional form that seeks to forge partnerships with incumbent social sector organizations. Like DoorDash and Airbnb, NLvoorelkaar mobilizes partnerships in a flexible and heterogeneous manner encompassing varying levels of boundary work. On the one hand, the platform forges partnerships with local welfare and volunteering agencies with the aim of establishing a form of logistical integration within the existing social sector. On the other hand, referring to "growth hacking", NLvoorelkaar pursues partnerships with actors *outside* the social sector to spur social mobilization among new user groups and social domains, thereby consolidating its platform ecosystem.

NLvoorelkaar was founded in 2011 as a social enterprise and is currently the biggest volunteering platform in the Netherlands. It derives its revenue from a subscription-based model that charges municipalities a fee in return for the set-up and maintenance of a local platform that organizes the matching of volunteering activities. It also runs a local "social marketing" campaign to promote and raise the visibility of volunteering activities (personal communication). While the platform is freely available to social organizations and citizens, local governments thus subsidize this free access, usually via two-year contracts. As a representative of NLvoorelkaar stated, local governments are looking for “new solutions for volunteering, neighborly help or [alleviating] loneliness” and contract with the platform as one way to achieve its goals (pers. comm.).

Since 2011, NLvoorelkaar has established a wide range of partnerships with “local partners” (46), “national partners” (12), and “participating organizations” (over 8000). “Participating organizations” are social welfare and civil society organizations with a profile on the NLvoorelkaar platform, from where they can post volunteering vacancies and recruit volunteers. These range from international organizations such as Amnesty International to various locally operating initiatives. “National partners” are businesses and charitable organizations that provide access to the platform on their own websites and help raise NLvoorelkaar’s visibility. Yet it is on the level of “local partnerships” that the intertwinement between platforms and the existing Dutch welfare infrastructure is most pronounced.

When NLvoorelkaar contracts with a municipality, it sets up a local-serving platform that connects to the organization’s national database.[13] While NLvoorelkaar provides the software infrastructure and maintains a national helpdesk, the daily operation of the local platform is managed by so-called “local partners”; usually municipal Volunteer Centers or welfare organizations. These local partners integrate NLvoorelkaar’s platform into their own service provision, for example by forwarding volunteers or care recipients to the platform, posting requests on behalf of citizens, or helping to realize platform-mediated volunteering matches. While these institutions continue to engage in offline services (such as the offline mediation of volunteering services or the delivery of care), the platform becomes another key medium through which volunteer-based welfare activities are organized – thus shoring up NLvoorelkaar’s “social impact”-driven value proposition.

Apart from logistical integration with social sector partners, NLvoorelkaar seeks to partner with organizations beyond this sector. It refers to this move as “growth-hacking”; the use of experimental partnerships and marketing methods to achieve quick user growth with minimal means (Van Roosmalen 2018). For example, the outbreak of Covid-19 in the Netherlands resulted in a seemingly unlikely partnership between NLvoorelkaar and the Dutch football Premier League. A distinct “Premier League” platform was created, targeted specifically at football fans. The two partners also launched a collaborative media campaign in which the Dutch national football team expressed support for NLvoorelkaar. Additionally, individual players and trainers participated in a volunteering initiative promoted on the platform and encouraged their fans to follow their example.

From the platform's perspective, this partnership had two objectives. First, it was anticipated that the campaign would raise NLvoorelkaar's overall public visibility. Second, it was also conceived as a strategy to find more citizens in need of social support and thereby consolidate its user base. As the platform was experiencing difficulties in this regard, the Premier League was seen as a valuable partner because of its nation-wide reach that traverses social and demographic groups, including those who may otherwise slip under the outreach radar. Indeed, a press release stated how "the power of football" was implemented "to detect and process as many help requests as possible".[14]

To remain the nation's biggest volunteering platform, it is vital for NLvoorelkaar to grow all sides of its marketplace (i.e. volunteers, help requesters and welfare organizations) and to establish as many matches as possible. This, after all, is the primary metric through which it realizes its contractual deliverables as well as its institutional legitimacy with local governments,[15] and partnerships form an invaluable boundary resource for accomplishing this objective by way of infrastructural integration and market consolidation. The quantification of "doing good" is central to social enterprise platforms like NLvoorelkaar, which have to combine ideals of social solidarity with a viable business model. While civil society's latent volunteering capacities usually remain difficult to grasp, the platform materializes this "altruistic surplus" (Tonkens 2010) through a growth strategy based on measurable indices. This emphasis on quantifiable matches, however, also raises the concern that volunteering (and social impact more generally) is considered first and foremost a *logistical, market-driven* problem of bringing together supply and demand, rather than a complex and embedded activity whose organization requires more sustained/structural public investments.

Conclusion: Actually existing platformization in post-welfare societies

As Graham (2020: 454) has noted, platforms achieve power through "a strategic deployment of 'conjunctural geographies' – a way of being simultaneously embedded and disembedded from the space-times they mediate". While disembeddedness certainly offer benefits in terms of accountability and cost avoidance, local-serving platforms will have less opportunity to disembed themselves compared to those providing online services. Moreover, platforms are generally becoming better attuned to the variety of benefits that institutional embeddedness may yield. In this contribution, we have examined the partnership as a strategic device and heterogeneous boundary resource through which platforms try to become embedded in local settings, create and exploit dependencies, and to thereby both expand their multisided markets and gain sociopolitical influence.

This need to become embedded in local, frequently urban settings is particularly pressing for asset-light or lean platforms. DoorDash, Airbnb, and NLvoorelkaar are each dependent on a robust and expanding user base willing and able to operate as platform complementors whose assets – e.g. restaurants, cars/e-bikes, vacation rentals, and time – can be leveraged for profit. Accordingly, any effort by these platforms to create and exploit dependencies is grounded in this fundamental need, which requires ongoing boundary work that extends beyond the digital realm into specific – preferably densely populated – locales. Partnerships, in this situation, constitute a particular mode of "relationship labor" (Shestakofsky and Kelkar 2020) intended to enable, maintain, and expand access to external assets.

Our three case studies have outlined four interconnected and often complementary ways in which partnerships help platforms to achieve this objective: 1) market consolidation, 2) logistical integration, 3) social mobilization, and/or 4) institutional legitimation. All four operational logics aim to render user assets and stakeholder interests "platform-ready", by aligning these with a platform's business objectives, protocols and interfaces. However, platforms also have to make themselves "ready" (i.e. useful or palatable) for their institutional settings and potential partners, which have had to rethink their own objectives since the pandemic.

While the partnerships initiated under the Main Street Strong umbrella mainly serve to consolidate DoorDash's multisided market, the Covid-related partnerships associated with Project DASH have been geared toward integrating the company's logistics platform into the service delivery infrastructure of municipal and civil society stakeholders. This has gained DoorDash a measure of institutional legitimacy and allowed it to brand itself as the platform that mobilizes its Dashers to "deliver good" on a national and local scale.[16] For Airbnb, its partnership with the city of Amsterdam ultimately served to safeguard the local sustainability of its business model. By offering to deploy its platform for purposes of tax collection and regulatory enforcement, Airbnb at once achieved a modest level of logistical integration with the city's governance apparatus, cultivated municipal dependencies on its services, and boosted its institutional legitimacy until the relationship turned sour. Its new *City Portal* forms a tool to streamline this relationship in a (post-)pandemic tourism landscape. The pandemic is likewise proving to be a pivotal moment for NLvoorelkaar, for which social mobilization and market consolidation are synonymous. While its social sector partnerships allow NLvoorelkaar to embed its sub-platforms into the local logistics of welfare service provision, its experimental partnerships aim to increase civic mobilization beyond the social sector and thereby expand its user/volunteer base. The size of this base seems to operate as the primary metric of the platform's institutional legitimacy, which ideally results in new service contracts.

Notwithstanding these analytical heuristics, platform partnerships are often nebulous phenomena whose shape and substance varies and can be difficult to parse. To "partner" with another organization may entail engaging – or *promising to engage* – in some form of service provision or other economic transaction, but it can also be little more than a marketing campaign. As a shorthand for a range of underdetermined activities, the partnership notion conceals as much as it illuminates – and is in this sense ideological. Partnerships are, in a way, whatever prospected partners want or need them to be: insofar as they evoke market-driven forms of organization that value collaboration and participation, they resonate with public sentiments and policy efforts celebrating civil society as the democratic locus of problem solving and solidarity in response to the recently exacerbated crisis of social reproduction (Van Dyk 2018). Indeed, the very indeterminacy marking the partnership concept also grants it its capaciousness as a boundary resource, especially at a time when platforms in a variety of industries seek to leverage new uncertainties and dependencies emerging during the Covid pandemic.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that the institutional boundary work achieved through partnership-building precedes the advent of platform power. The neoliberalization of statecraft, articulated through an "*urbanization of neoliberalism*" (Peck and Theodore 2012: 65), emphasis in original), has turned cities into important "institutional laboratories" for policy experimentation (Peck and Theodore 2012: 58). Such experimentation frequently favours the pursuit of public-private partnerships and "the deployment of community-based programs" as postwelfare governance solutions for city administrators attempting to manage "a broad array of 'downloaded' regulatory responsibilities and socioeconomic risks" (Peck and Theodore 2012: 58; 64). The ongoing Covid crisis, which has had a particularly deleterious impact on urban areas, amplifies these responsibilities and risks, pushing municipalities to further negotiate their institutional boundaries vis-à-vis market and civil society actors.

What we call "actually existing platformization", then, is a predominantly urban phenomenon where platforms facilitate, engineer, and monetize such boundary work, by responding to the logistical and infrastructural needs of institutional stakeholders in a frequently opportunistic and makeshift manner. What makes platforms a different type of partner compared to other private actors is that they are hybrid entities that merge functions traditionally attributed to the market, the state, or civil society. They are market- and rule-*makers*, more so than takers, despite the frequent adjustments and compromises they need to make in order to meet their objectives. As partly decentralized market-makers, finally, platforms are a quintessentially neoliberal organizational form and actually existing platformization should likewise be seen as a process taking shape within – and taking advantage of – the institutional landscape forged by neoliberal urbanism.

Notes

[1] See https://blog.doordash.com/powering-the-logistics-of-social-good-8cbb312e8e54?gi=54687b4fd465 (Accessed 14 January 2021).

[2] See https://blog.doordash.com/joining-forces-with-united-way-to-increase-access-in-communities-nationwide-5528b3bf4ff7 (Accessed 14 January 2021).

[3] See https://www.quorum.us/case-studies/doordash-state-and-local/ (Accessed 14 January 2021).

[4] See https://blog.doordash.com/announcing-main-street-strong-our-commitment-to-helping-restaurants-on-the-road-to-recovery-3d5dff6b649b (Accessed 14 January 2021).

[5] See https://blog.doordash.com/announcing-our-partnership-with-bluevine-for-the-paycheck-protection-program-6f1daa628ed7 (Accessed 14 January 2021).

[6] See https://blog.doordash.com/introducing-new-initiatives-to-support-black-owned-businesses-on-doordash-and-caviar-6b2b7cb4586c (Accessed 14 January 2021). We have reason to question the substance and sustainability of these two partnerships, however, given that the links that are supposed to take the reader from DoorDash's blog to the dedicated wage pages of its partners are no longer active. Accordingly, it is impossible to gauge the actual outcomes of these partnerships, which appear to have been short-lived, makeshift initiatives rather than substantial collaborative efforts to save small restaurants.

[7] See https://www.airbnb.com/cityportal (Accessed 15 January 2021).

[8] While Airbnb has established dozens of partnerships with commercial parties and non-profit organizations, here we focus on city partnerships.

[9] See https://www.airbnb.com/resources/hosting-homes/a/investing-in-our-partnerships-with-local-communities-266 (Accessed 15 January 2021).

[10] See https://www.airbnbcitizen.com/airbnb-policy-tool-chest/ (Accessed 15 January 2021).

[11] See https://publicaties.rekenkamer.amsterdam.nl/handhaving-vakantieverhuuronderzoeksrapport/ (Accessed 15 January 2021).

[12] See https://web.archive.org/web/20201113105456/https:/angel.co/company/airbnb/jobs/983213-senior-full-stack-software-engineer-cities (Accessed 15 January 2021).

[13] Currently, there are 46 of these local platforms operating. See https://zakelijk.nlvoorelkaar.nl/partners/#lokale-partners (Accessed 15 January 2021, Dutch only).

[14] See https://eredivisie.nl/en-us/uitgelicht/eredivisie-lanceert-ism-nlvoorelkaar-een-landelijk-vrijwilligersplatform (Accessed 15 January 2021, Dutch only).

[15] See https://zakelijk.nlvoorelkaar.nl/resultaten/ (Accessed 15 January 2021, Dutch only)

[16] See https://blog.doordash.com/delivering-good-its-a-movement-16b5f7094c61 (Accessed 14 January 2021).

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