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Abstract

With more and more governments around the world considering or having already passed laws aiming to regulate the relationship between news publishers and online platforms, primarily, by ensuring a form of remuneration of the former from the latter, we ought to understand the current situation. This paper seeks to inquire whom platforms fund, how and why. We created a dataset of organizations that have participated in Google News Initiative or Facebook Journalism Project by gathering data from communicative and informative material found on the websites of platforms and beneficiaries. Through our analysis, we identified stakeholders that play a crucial role in the realization of platforms' funding programs, whom we call funding intermediaries. Therefore, this paper contends that the platforms' strategic decision has not only been to distribute money through a complicated governance structure, but also to target parts of the industry that have been hurt by an ongoing crisis, aggravated by the platforms' dominance of the advertising industry. However, funding journalism ensures neither media capture, i.e., positive or lack of critical coverage, nor regulatory capture, i.e., avoiding or adjusting regulation. As a result, we ultimately propose to approach capture as a political-economic concept to study platform power.

Keywords

Google News Initiative, Facebook Journalism Project, platform funding, journalism, media capture, infrastructural capture, platform governance, platform power

Introduction

Academics, civil society organizations and investigative journalists have been trying, in recent years, to track how large online platforms have been funding news media organizations, a phenomenon often discussed as part of the increasing capture of the industry (Schiffrin 2014; Schiffrin 2021; Bell and Owen 2017; Nechushtai 2018). This paper offers novel insights into Facebook and Google's recent funding for journalism programs, Facebook Journalism Project (hereinafter FJP) and Google News Initiative (hereinafter GNI) respectively. Specifically, we created a dataset of 6,773 beneficiaries by gathering data concerning the period between 2017 and early 2022 from communication material found on websites of platforms and organizations that have participated in a funding program. Through our analysis, we identified the existence of stakeholders that play a key role in the development and realization of platforms' funding programs, whom we name "funding intermediaries."

We define funding intermediaries as essential actors of the news ecosystem that offer privileged access to platforms through partnerships formed as part of their funding projects. We find that our twofold contribution, with the concept of funding intermediaries and the data regarding platforms' funding, allows for a deeper understanding of platforms' strategy to capture and platformize as many levels of the news industry as possible. The recurring crises of the news industry have both exacerbated the need for more funding and have legitimized platforms' intervention in lack of an appropriate publicly accountable response. As a result, we argue that platforms' funding for journalism may also have significant and unexpected consequences for the news ecosystem and platform governance. We wish for this paper to serve as a point of departure for future research that will zoom in on specific projects or countries and conduct more qualitative analysis that will allow us to better understand the impact of these activities on journalistic praxis.

Platforms and Publishers

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach to tackle the phenomenon of platformization of journalism and explore the increasingly complex relationship between news media organizations and platforms (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022). First, we ought to briefly unpack the concept of platform. Earlier attempts to define what constitutes a platform revolved around the notion of intermediation, i.e., bridging two – or more – parties; others have also specifically talked about “infomediation” to emphasize “the mediation between information and consumption” (Siapera 2013, 11). Other scholars have spoken to platforms’ unique technology: “an online ‘platform’ is a programmable digital architecture designed to organize interactions between users-not just end users but also corporate entities and public bodies” (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 4).

Digital platforms are, thus, digital infrastructures, upon which applications can be built and run (Gillespie 2010; Plantin et al. 2018), while affording socioeconomic exchanges and, thus, hold high symbolic, sociopolitical and economic value. Consequently, online private platforms function as infrastructures for our communicational or commercial exchanges (Mansell and Steinmueller 2020); simultaneously, they have also obtained an infrastructural status in our modern societies that has allowed them to expand to every possible direction, making alternatives almost unimaginable (Plantin and Punathambekar 2019). This is often framed as “platformization,” i.e., “the penetration of online infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of online platforms in different societal sectors and spheres of life” (Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck 2019, 5–6).

What is more, this can be seen as the result of the unfettered capitalist dogma for growth of Silicon Valley conglomerates (York 2021). Barbrook and Cameron capture this in their seminal essay on the “Californian Ideology”: a “contradictory mix of technological determinism and libertarian individualism” (1996, 49), which “depends on a willful blindness toward [...] racism, poverty, and environmental degradation” (1996, 46). At the same time, as Smyrniotis has written, technology companies born from and with this mentality might boast about their commitment to ideals, like democracy and equality, but “exercise a disproportionate influence on political life by massively financing causes that are dear to them and by ‘capturing’ a substantial part of the media and institutions for their interests” (Smyrniotis 2022, 41)¹. Therefore, platforms, along with their new complex structures of governance (Klonick 2018; Gillespie 2018), have had sweeping effects on our digital public sphere, from the way we have been consuming and exchanging information to the way we have been producing it (Helmond 2015; Nieborg and Poell 2018; Owen 2019). Indeed, as Plantin et al. note: “the rise of digital technologies, in a neoliberal, political, and economic climate, has simultaneously facilitated a ‘platformization’ of infrastructures and an ‘infrastructuralization’ of platforms” (Plantin et al. 2018, 298). Journalism and news-making have not been an exception to this.

Furthermore, this paper builds upon relevant literature that has engaged with the complex issue of the relationship between news media organizations (or publishers) and platforms. Nielsen and Ganter (2018; 2022) have demonstrated, through extensive empirical research, how this is a deeply asymmetrical relationship, as platforms may affect, potentially, every slice of the journalistic praxis (e.g., production and dissemination of news). They have also showcased how publishers may become too dependent on the services provided by platforms due to the “fear of missing out,” and how this may open them up to risks because

¹ Translated from French by the author.

of unpredicted and sudden changes to platforms' algorithms or interests (Nielsen and Ganter 2022, 141, 150; Nielsen and Ganter 2018, 1613; Caplan and boyd 2018).

At the same time, they have also indicated how platforms may themselves depend on publishers to exercise "platform power," which is relational to their capacity to "maintain relations and sustain them over time" (Nielsen and Ganter 2022, 22). As such, the relationship between platforms and publishers is "marked by a tension to cooperate and an uneasiness [...] of becoming too dependent on the former" (Simon, 2022, 4). Hence, many use the term "frenemies" to describe their connection; indeed, their relationship seems to be in a constant negotiation of power, which "resides implicitly in the other's dependency" (Emerson 1962, 32). Chua and Westlund have observed the same situation as well (2022, 66), but also note a recent attempt from publishers to "counterbalance" their dependence on platforms by reconfiguring their resource investment on platform services to "wrangle back control of their audiences, data and revenues" (Chua and Westlund 2022, 82); this change has been noted by other scholars as well (Meese and Hurcombe 2020).

Finally, DeVito (2017) has written about the "algorithmic values" that govern Facebook's News Feed, i.e., "a system of criteria" used to fuel algorithmic curation of the information presented in our social feeds (2017, 2). DeVito's empirical work showcase the departure from the gatekeeping role that traditional media played prior to the domination of online intermediaries, albeit in a "semi-transparent manner" (2017, 4) to a situation where, in line with the Silicon Valley's "solutionist" mindset (Morozov 2013), algorithms are viewed as "the solution for the journalistic bias problem" (DeVito 2017, 4). All in all, we could frame the above literature as contributions to understanding the negotiation of power between publishers and platforms. In the next section, we will unpack the notion of capture and how it is understood in this paper.

Media and Infrastructural Capture

With this paper we also aspire to expand our understanding of capture, not just as a normative concept that speaks to influence and dependency, but also as a lens to inquire platform power. The concept of capture derives from the economic theory of "regulatory capture" which was designed to account for the ways in which regulators often end up working in the interests of the industries they are supposed to be overseeing on behalf of the public (Stigler 1971). For instance, the recent leak of "Uber Files" showed, among others, how Uber lobbied academics to produce favorable reports for its services, as well as political leaders to help with its expansion in markets, like France, where it was illegal to operate and was facing tremendous backlash from taxi drivers (Davies et al. 2022). Beyond regulatory or academic capture, scholars have also suggested that "platform capture" is also at play, whereby platforms may become captured by "bad actors who rig [them] for their own gains" (Usher 2021, 31) and who exercise governance through them (Agarwal 2022).

More relevant to this study, the concept of media capture has been used to inquire similar situations in the media ecosystem, primarily concerning journalists not holding state power to account, especially in times of crises (Schiffrin 2014); More generally, it refers to situations where media refrain from scrutinizing certain topics and/or stakeholders due to capture by vested interests, often in the form of economic dependency, and which end up promoting their "political agenda" (Simon 2022, 9; Schiffrin 2018, 1036)². However, media capture should not be solely understood as a risk to editorial processes, which can still "operate *independently from* platform companies" (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022, 9; emphasis theirs). Indeed, Efrat Nechushtai has proposed, in light of online platforms'

² For an extensive discussion on the different facets of media capture, see Schiffrin 2021 and Schiffrin 2018.

domination, the concept of “infrastructural capture” (Nechushtai 2018) to analyze the risk of dependence of news media on platform infrastructure and tools (Nielsen and Ganter 2022, 150).

Nechushtai’s main focal point was to examine the relationship between news organizations and digital platforms, arguing that it has evolved from “parasitic” (Siapera 2013, 13) to “symbiotic” (Nechushtai 2018, 1052). Additionally, some even argue that this relationship has now evolved from “symbiotic” to “dependent” (Sebbah, Sire, and Smyrnaio 2020) as a way of highlighting the asymmetrical power that platforms exert on news organizations (Smyrnaio and Rebillard 2019). These platforms’ oligopolistic tendencies for centralization and maximization of profits, and control over flows of information have accelerated and exacerbated the various crises felt by the news industry (Smyrnaio 2018; van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018). Nechushtai was, thus, interested in studying the “platformization of news” (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022, 1), i.e., how the production and distribution of news has become increasingly “dependent on the tools, advertising revenue, and data and *governance standards* of GAFAM platforms” (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4278); emphasis added).

The “governance standards” part is crucial to this article, as we argue that news organizations have not only become more dependent on platforms’ “material benefits” (Nechushtai 2018, 1049), like access to audiences or funding, but also on their networks; hence, a situation of network capture made possible by network governance (Caplan 2022). Nechushtai employed the notion of infrastructural capture to describe “situations in which an organization tasked with scrutinizing another organization, institution, business, or industry is incapable of operating sustainably without the resources or services they provide” (Nechushtai 2018, 1046). To better understand this concept, we also ought to briefly unpack the notion of infrastructure, particularly in relation to media and platforms. Plantin and Punathambekar have proposed studying digital platforms through an “infrastructural optic” based on “media infrastructure studies,” inviting us to consider “the social, material, cultural, and political dimensions of the infrastructures that undergird and sustain communication networks and media cultures across the world” (Plantin and Punathambekar 2019, 166).

Subsequently, we extrapolate that infrastructure does not necessarily need to be tied to materiality. As Larkin has theorized, infrastructures are “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space” (Larkin 2013, 328) and they have critical cultural and political value (ibid, 330). In other words, we should think of infrastructures as multifaceted assemblages that consist of many dimensions: material, political, cultural, analytical, and others. As a result, something can be built to function as an infrastructure, but it can also transform into one. That is what Plantin et al. imply when posing the rhetorical question of “What is Google, then: a platform? An infrastructure? Is it sequentially or simultaneously both?” (Plantin et al. 2018, 294).

From DNI to GNI: Google’s decade-long funding for journalism

In the previous decade, Google emerged as an important funder of journalism. A recent study of the German media landscape went as far as naming the company “[a] media patron” (Fanta and Dachwitz 2020). The same study also demonstrated how Google started experimenting with its programs in France in 2013 before expanding them to the European Union (hereinafter EU) in 2015 and, finally, to a global level in 2018. This was due to political pressure by the French government, to which Google responded by setting up a €60 million fund to support press publishers’ innovation projects in 2013, which was the “blueprint” for

the Digital News Initiative (hereinafter DNI)³ and the Google News Initiative (hereinafter GNI) (Fanta and Dachwitz 2020, 89).

The initial plan of the French government was to impose a new tax on Google that would compensate media whose content was indexed in the search engine. So, under the risk of a possible regulation, Google agreed to pay French news publishers, albeit on its own terms; a pattern that would dictate all similar future deals and negotiations. DNI was, thus, a “response to specific regional pressures in Europe [...] and an attempt to improve relations with publishing partners” (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022, 127). Interestingly, the same story would play out once more in 2019, when the leading association of French news publishers, APIG, signed a framework agreement with Google based on the so-called neighboring right introduced with Article 15 of the Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market⁴; this right *inter alia* enabled press publishers, to negotiate licensing fees with online intermediaries to seek remuneration for the (re)use of their content. Google entered negotiations with French publishers to satisfy their demand for remuneration, but went to court after the latter filed a complaint with the French Competition Authority arguing that Google had negotiated in bad faith, something with which the Authority agreed and fined Google with €500 million (approximately \$540 million; Kayali 2021).

In 2018, Google launched its global funding for journalism program, the GNI, to “deepen [its] commitment” to the news industry and had three main objectives: (i) elevate and strengthen quality journalism, (ii) evolve business models to drive sustainable growth, and (iii) power news organizations through technological innovation. The program includes training for journalists, grants, credits for online advertising, free access to a variety of Google’s services, and a series of “Innovation Challenges,” similar to the ones found in the DNI. Thus, the GNI came in a time when online platforms were facing regulatory scrutiny on many levels and marked Google’s attempt to, on the one hand, not fall behind Facebook’s own global funding program and, on the other hand, to further expand its platformization strategy.

Facebook Journalism Project

Contrary to Google, Facebook has received much less scrutiny from academia in relation to its funding for journalism. Jurno and D’Andréa are among the few academics that have specifically tackled Facebook’s funding program and, in particular, as part of the company’s “process of platformization of journalism” (2020, 503). The authors identify two periods of this process: the first spans from 2014 to 2016, where the “platform offer[ed] itself as an infrastructure for news publishers, particularly around Instant Articles,” and the second spans from 2017 to 2019, where the platform “began to offer its services as a coordinator of activities related to the journalistic craft” mainly through “funding of training and education initiatives for and about journalism” (ibid). They also provide us with a brief history of how the FJP came to be, with Campbell Brown, head of global news partnerships at Facebook, taking the lead and meeting with dozens of publishers prior to its launch to first, pitch the project and, second, recruit them (ibid, 516). As Lucia Moses reported at the time, some of these meetings were even held at Brown’s apartment, with publishers feeling “impressed” merely by the fact that Facebook was talking to them (2018).

Furthermore, they connect the FJP’s launch to the techlash and recurring crises that the company was suffering from at the time, hence the two periods. However, they conclude

³ DNI stands for Google’s Digital News Initiative fund, which later became Google News Initiative.

⁴ Directive 2019/790 of the European Commission can be found here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/790/oj>.

that Facebook improved its approach in the second period (2017-2019) as regards the way it treated journalism. Subsequently, they paint a rather positive image of the platform because of its decision to assume a more coordinating role (i.e., managing the governance of the funding process) instead of being simply a benefactor, like Google did previously (Jurno and D'Andréa 2020, 518). Indeed, from the very beginning, Facebook pursued a different strategy compared to Google by tapping into an existing network of industry stakeholders to distribute its funds. Facebook Journalism Project was announced on 11 January 2017 as a means of “[establishing] stronger ties between Facebook and the news industry” (Simo 2017). This was part of Facebook’s strategy to “reconcile its desires with the aspirations of journalistic institutions” and “consolidate the platform as an ‘obligatory point of passage’ for journalism” (ibid, 520).

Methodology

We built our database by collecting data from the companies’ websites and, when necessary, from beneficiaries’ websites; the data cover the period from 2017 to early 2022; the latest data were gathered on 10 January 2022 for FJP and 6 December 2021 for GNI. Provided that neither platform provides an interactive or explorable database of their funding initiatives, we had to develop our own data-gathering method. Google shared a downloadable file with all its news partners; however, it contained many typos, duplicates, and only included the partners’ names, while the file’s format was not easy to interact with (i.e., to extract data from).

We did not wish to include Google’s DNI because it focused exclusively on the European market, whereas we wished to tackle the global reach of platforms’ funding programs. This is a limitation in and of itself but is a conscious one to compare more accurately the two platforms’ global programs. As we will see later, both the nature and role of funding intermediaries seem to be different in FJP and GNI from DNI, which is another reason why we decided to exclude DNI from this paper. In other words, we wished to focus on the current landscape before projecting our new framing to older data. Last, we need to underline that the scope of this paper excludes platforms’ distinct licensing projects, like Google News Showcase and Facebook News, or separate deals with news publishers; these are crucial aspects of platform funding for journalism, which beget for investigation, but would gravely expand the current scope of this paper. We reckon that the data presented and analyzed here suffice to delineate platforms’ overarching strategies; nonetheless, future researchers should zoom into specific instances, like the aforementioned, to enrich the platforms’ funding mosaic.

The data cover a period of approximately four years, from Facebook Journalism Project’s launch in 2017 to early January 2022. While we have tried to minimize errors, due to the minimal data provided by platforms and the difficulty to acquire them, it is possible that some discrepancies exist. For this reason, we wish to publicly release our data and invite other researchers to collaborate and continue ameliorating our database. By taking inspiration from relevant research projects, namely Alexander Fanta and Ingo Dachwitz's work and the Tech Transparency Project⁵, we proceeded with the following steps:

- For FJP:

⁵ Specifically, TPP’s report “Google’s Media Takeover,” that has accumulated a vast trove of data regarding Google’s “payment to media organizations around the world.” Available here: <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/googles-media-takeover>.

- We loaded all articles' links and headlines found on FJP's blog concerning the aforementioned period (including announcement of partnerships, press releases, etc).
- We 'scraped' all articles by downloading the page's Source Code (using Mozilla's *Firefox*) as an HTML file and opening it with a text editor, which allowed us to get all articles' titles, their category and their corresponding hyperlink; the total number of articles was approximately 500.
- We classified them based on their categories and opened every article containing partnership announcements and relevant information and manually collected relevant data, like beneficiaries' names, location, grant amount, etc., as well as information related to MJF's projects, like duration and partners involved.
- For GNI:
 - We downloaded the GNI's 2021 "impact report"⁶, which was available as a PDF; we converted it to a CSV file that made it easier to edit. Unfortunately, Google did not include details for each beneficiary, so we did not have access to beneficiaries' country of origin, amount awarded, etc.
 - We, then, downloaded the list of beneficiaries that received finance from GNI's Journalism Emergency Relief Fund⁷ (hereinafter JERF) which distributed \$39.5 million to approximately 5,600 organizations. In this list, the country of origin of each beneficiary was provided, but the allocated money was not included.
 - We compared the two datasets and found 5,437 matches (i.e., organizations that received money both from a GNI program and JERF). That way we managed to attribute location data to most beneficiaries from the GNI impact report. However, for around 1,200 organizations that were included in the GNI dataset and were not in the JERF list, location and project participation could not be identified.
 - Last, through our own research, we identified and added around 500 beneficiaries that were not included in the GNI's 2021 impact report.

It is worth highlighting that Facebook was more transparent in terms of providing the amounts of money involved in its funding projects by sharing either the total amount pledged to a program or the exact money allocated to each recipient. However, it did not keep a list of its programs nor of the beneficiaries, which makes research extremely difficult. On the other hand, Google rarely provided financial specificities around its projects and, instead, shared total amounts of money invested in a year. What is more, we requested access to more detailed data from both platforms but to no avail.

Findings

Dataset

Before addressing the data related to our proposed concept of funding intermediaries, we reckon that this paper would benefit from presenting an overview of the whole dataset we created as part of this research project. Specifically, we identified a total of 6,773 beneficiaries, who have participated in 126 programs (43 of Google and 83 of Facebook) across 120 countries. We define a beneficiary as an organization that has participated in a

⁶ <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/impact2021>.

⁷ <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/info/journalism-emergency-relief-fund>.

platform funding program; we counted each as a single entry in our dataset, regardless of the number of participations in a program; 5,511 organizations have participated in a GNI program, 941 in an FJP one, and 321 in both platforms' programs. The discrepancy between GNI and FJP can be attributed to Google's JERF project that was launched in 2020 to "support local news" in light of the pandemic outbreak (Gingras 2020).

Most funding projects were specifically tailored around three themes: Covid-19, local news, and innovation. Specifically, Google's JERF was the largest project and was framed similarly: "the Fund aimed to support the production of original journalism for local communities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic" (Gingras 2020); the grants ranged between \$5,000 and \$30,000 with variations per region and with a cap at \$85,000 (Blecher 2020). As regards Facebook, we identified 13 projects with Covid or coronavirus in their title, with the largest being the "Community Network to Support Coronavirus Reporting" with 400 US-only beneficiaries and \$2 million distributed; additionally, 12 other projects that were identified had local in their title, with the largest being "COVID-19 Local News Relief Fund Grant Program" with 203 US-only beneficiaries and \$16 million distributed⁸. Last, we discerned 13 projects, 10 from Google and 3 from Facebook, which had innovation in their title, with the largest being GNI's "Innovation Challenges"⁹ that take place in many regions globally. Finally, concerning the geographical distribution of beneficiaries (Table 3), we noticed a pattern of over-representation of US-based organizations in our dataset: 2,205 beneficiaries operate or are based in the US; the second largest country in terms of total beneficiaries is Brazil with 424 organizations, while the third largest is Canada with 340 (Table 2).

Funding Intermediaries

This research project's overarching objective was to understand how Google and Facebook have been funding journalism in recent years. Both platforms have been advertising their collaborations with the news industry (Simo 2017; Schindler 2018). So, while we were analyzing FJP's data, we discerned that many programs involved the collaboration of industry stakeholders, whom we named "funding intermediaries," as they mediate between platforms and news media organizations to facilitate the platforms' funding activities *directly* or *indirectly* (Table 1). Previously, in the DNI's announcement (Blecher 2015), Google listed names of industry figures as members of its DNI Council, which would vote on larger projects, while proclaiming that the program would launch as a partnership with eight large European newspapers (Cook 2015). Therefore, the involvement of funding intermediaries seems to have always been part of platforms' strategies.

However, on the one hand, in DNI, most of them were publishers and, on the other hand, their role was relatively limited. Conversely, we found that funding intermediaries identified in our dataset were, primarily, third-party organizations, like journalist associations and, most importantly, their role was upgraded; for instance, *Blue Engine Collaborative*, a "consortium of mission-driven consultants and advisors" led by Tim Griggs, a former Executive Director of *New York Times*, has developed FJP's Accelerator's global training program¹⁰; notably, at first, it exclusively partnered with FJP, but it now seems to have

⁸ Most amounts were listed in USD; in cases where another currency was used, we converted it to USD using the exchange rate on 1 January of the project's year.

⁹ More information on the GNI Innovation Challenges can be found here: <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/innovation-challenges/>.

¹⁰ The only information available for the *Blue Engine Collaborative* can be found on their LinkedIn profile (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/blue-engine-collaborative/about/>) and on FJP's Accelerator Guide (<https://scontent.fath5-1.fna.fbcdn.net/v/t39.8562->

expanded to GNI's programs too¹¹. Therefore, we understand these intermediaries as key stakeholders of the news ecosystem that, through partnerships, offer platforms privileged access to media networks, as well as legitimacy to their funding activities. We identified 86 stakeholders, which we labelled as follows¹²: (i) 28 journalist associations, (ii) 16 educational institutions, (iii) 15 news media organizations¹³, (iv) 8 philanthropic institutions, and (v) 19 non-profit organizations. More specifically:

- 1) We define journalist associations as interest groups promoting and lobbying for journalists' interests. These are often groups that bring together numerous news outlets and, thus, are important stakeholders in governance deliberations thanks to their network and expertise. For instance, in 2019, Facebook partnered with Abraji (Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism) to launch a free online training program for 3,000 journalists in Brazil¹⁴.
- 2) In our dataset, educational institutions are, principally, universities with journalism-focused programs and research centers focusing on studying journalism. In most cases, these intermediaries were either funded by platforms to organize training programs or conduct relevant research. For instance, in 2019 Kadir Has University and Habitat Association launched a training program in Turkey with the support of Facebook, to train more than 1,000 journalists and journalism students in how to use Facebook and Instagram in their reporting¹⁵.
- 3) We define news media organizations that operate as funding intermediaries as organizations that have benefited from a funding program with the purpose of using their experience and expertise to disseminate grants, review grant applications or train other journalists. For instance, in 2020, Google extended a previous partnership with Internews with a \$1 million grant, to help the organization promote news and media literacy in India through workshops and training activities¹⁶.
- 4) Philanthropic institutions have long played an important role in providing grants to news organizations (Lewis, 2012). In this paper, we mainly define them as non-profit institutions with social and financial capital, as well as with grant-awarding programs, and which serve as networking and sustainability hubs for, mainly, local newsrooms. As a result, these are important stakeholders that already have strong ties with journalists. By partnering with them, Google and Facebook gain access to crucial networks. For instance, both have partnered with Fundación Gabo to launch training programs for journalists in Latin America¹⁷.
- 5) Finally, non-profit organizations are defined in this context as public interest groups promoting important topics, from health-related issues to media literacy. Some of them are also dedicated to helping journalism's sustainability, which makes them

[6/10000000_678352799983258_1138454571661287630_n.pdf?nc_cat=109&ccb=1-7&nc_sid=ae5e01&nc_ohc=lGw54CZiKJEAX9jw_2z&nc_ht=scontent.fath5-1.fna&oh=00_AT-dBfBs7dnhJuln1q0koe_BAqetFsE1TMnED-TaJ1Bzrg&oe=632DA0A4](https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/Facebook-abraji-brazil-training-program).

¹¹ It served as a partner to GNI's "North America Sponsorships Lab": too <https://inn.org/resources/gni-north-america-sponsorships-lab/>.

¹² The list might not be extensive, but we believe that it serves as sufficient evidence of the proposed argument in this paper.

¹³ We define news media organizations as organizations producing journalistic content, including fact-checkers

¹⁴ The initiative is called "Sustainable Local Journalism":

<https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/Facebook-abraji-brazil-training-program>.

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/Facebook-journalist-training-program-turkey>.

¹⁶ <https://tech.hindustantimes.com/tech/news/google-grants-1-million-for-promoting-news-literacy-in-india-story-hOodZTDmjeFKDsDX4d3uxO.html>.

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/fundacion-gabo-and-Facebook> and <https://latam.googleblog.com/2021/04/1a-fundacion-gabo-y-google-news.html>.

crucial access points for platforms. For instance, the European Journalism Centre partnered with Facebook in 2020 to distribute \$3 million in relief grants related to the Covid-19 pandemic and, more than once, with Google to organize fellowships and training programs¹⁸.

Moreover, we found: 45 intermediaries, who are either based or operate in North America, 2 in Africa, 7 in Asia, 14 in Europe, 7 in South America, 3 in Oceania, and 8 with global reach. As a result, in line with the broader findings, funding intermediaries were found to be predominantly based or active in North America and, specifically, the US. Additionally, we classified the ways in which Google and Facebook have been funding the news industry as *direct*, i.e., by awarding grants to news organizations, and *indirect*, i.e., by providing training, fellowships, etc. Similarly, we discerned that funding intermediaries are involved in the grant-awarding process either *directly* (i.e., by allocating platforms' funds; Table 4; Table 6¹⁹) or *indirectly* (i.e., by reviewing grant applications or providing training, etc.; Table 5).

Table 1 - Types of Funding and Intermediation

| Stakeholders | Direct Funding/Mediation | Indirect Funding/Mediation | (In)direct Funding/Mediation |
|-------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Platforms | Grants, advertising credits | Training, fellowships, etc. | Donations to support intermediaries (direct platform funding) |
| Funding Intermediaries | Handling grant distribution for platforms | Reviewing grant applications for platforms, providing training, etc. | Using platforms' donations to develop their own funding initiatives (indirect platform funding/direct intermediary funding) |

Discussion

Google and Facebook have emerged as patrons of the news industry, having developed multi-million-dollar funding initiatives, most notably, the GNI and FJP. These companies have been funding journalism through other ways too, either in a self-regulated manner through their own licensing programs or in a (co-)regulated fashion through competition (e.g., Australia's News Media Bargaining Code; hereinafter NMBC) or copyright (e.g., EU's Copyright Directive) policy. The news industry's main argument, also supported by scholars and governments, is that online platforms have usurped online advertising revenues (ACCC 2019; Scifrin 2021, 7), often through anti-competitive behavior (McCabe and Wakabayashi 2020). As it happens, according to Reuters, the two companies generated \$607 billion in advertising revenues between 2018-2021, approximately the same period that they launched or revamped their funding programs (Coster 2021).

However, it would be short-sighted to blame them as the sole reason for journalism's crisis; as Pickard has written: the "systemic market failure has created a wide range of problems, from the loss of local journalism to a lack of affordable and accessible internet services" (2020b, 68). What is more, this would also further fuel a platform deterministic approach, whereby platforms are depicted as extremely powerful entities, which thus hinders

¹⁸ <https://grant.ejc.net/s/gni-student-fellowship>.

¹⁹ Notably, we were unable to identify a news media organization that served this role for platforms.

our way of inquiring their power and thinking of alternatives. We would also be remiss not to acknowledge the fact that, in many cases, struggling news organizations would have had to either let people off or shut down entirely if not for platforms' financial aid, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Indeed, as Dragomir has written, “media outlets doing solely independent journalism, especially those serving audiences outside the Western world, have either succumbed to financial crises or are hardly surviving” (Dragomir 2018, 1132). While Dragomir speaks to state capture of media and how governments, particularly in Eastern Europe, have been trying to control news media through funding initiatives, it serves as an alarm concerning the risks that increasing contingency on one authoritative source might create. As a result, this is also a reminder that we ought to start considering “[removing] news media from the market as much as possible” (Pickard 2020a, 716) and rethink our public service media.

Both platforms' endeavors to fund journalism, news organizations and other relevant stakeholders are part and parcel of their strategy to become the de-facto infrastructural backbone of the news industry. This is not limited only to “platformizing” the vertical and horizontal axes of news production but also extends to exercising their power to the larger news ecosystem (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 50). Facebook has been dealing with a severe reputational crisis since 2016, principally due to its own shortcomings and repeated failures that led to a proliferation of disinformation, hate speech and other deleterious content, as well as to a massive privacy debacle with implications for the US Presidential Election of 2016. This was a turning point for Facebook on many levels that sought to change various policies to enforce trust and safety, albeit with questionable results, as the ‘Facebook Papers’ leak demonstrated (Lima 2021). It might be that Facebook saw this opportunity to remedy a part of its deteriorating image through the launch of FJP (Nielsen and Ganter 2022, 145): both from the perspective of emerging as a benefactor of a struggling news industry – especially by assuming the role of a coordinator with funding intermediaries – and from the perspective of capturing media in a bid to soften their criticism or reduce scrutiny.

We do not claim that any of the above two perspectives were indeed Facebook's objectives as we lack supporting qualitative data. However, both platforms have consistently asserted that news content returns insignificant revenue (Turvill 2020). Therefore, we find it difficult not to argue that the primary goal has been to reap reputational and political gains (Mel 2020). Expanding Jurno and D'Andréa's framing of Facebook's strategic decision to assume a coordinating role and acting as a central node in the news industry's ecosystem, we contend that Facebook employed intermediaries to consolidate itself not only as an “‘obligatory point of passage’ for journalism” (Jurno and D'Andréa 2020, 520), but as an indispensable infrastructure for journalistic praxis and the broader governance of journalism. In that sense, FJP has indeed established “stronger ties” with the news industry (Simo 2017): not only has it become of existential importance for news media organizations, especially with the Covid-19 crisis, it is also now important for other industry stakeholders, from journalist associations to educational institutions.

The same applies to Google, as it has expanded the integration of funding intermediaries, similar to Facebook's strategy. Both platforms are now so entangled with and embedded in the news media ecosystem that is increasingly difficult to revert the level of dependency of stakeholders on them. We believe that this epitomizes the notion of infrastructural capture and hints at a deeper level of capture, one that expands beyond the socio-technical stack to networks and governance structures.

Provided that online platforms rely on network effects to operate and maximize socioeconomic value, it makes sense for them to capture cultural producers, like news media, and their networks. Furthermore, the state of current policymaking, like NMBC, fails to provide much-needed alternative remedies, such as, for instance, distributing funds through

an independent and auditable public fund (Macdonald 2022); instead, it involves platforms as part of proposed regulatory remedies, which runs the risk of entrenching platforms' asymmetrical power even more by "regulating dependency" of publishers on platforms (Ouakrat 2020; Papaevangelou and Smyrnaio 2022). However, any policy should be based on data that would allow for a deeper understanding of the current landscape. Google and Facebook have made it extremely difficult to get access to detailed data regarding their funding projects, instead opting for opaqueness; as Courtney Radsch has written: "improving transparency of this notoriously opaque market as well as competitiveness would help level the playing field and give the media a fighting chance to reclaim a share of the advertising pie" (2022).

In our research, most intermediaries were journalist associations, which suggests that platforms have been using third parties to not only fund news media organizations, but also to capture stakeholders whose primary role is to protect and promote their trade associates' interests. In recent years, trade associations have been competing with one another in terms of lobbying policy-makers, especially in the EU which has been leading the regulatory race in relation to rules for competition and content moderation (Alves et al. 2021). Journalist associations have the necessary expertise to distribute funds to peers, review grant applications and whatever else may be requested by platforms but, more importantly, they have crucial networking capacities. As a result, platforms' funding for journalism may also have significant and unexpected consequences for the news industry ecosystem.

Even though the pandemic offered both platforms the chance to extend and increase their funding programs, both in quantity and in geographical reach, we noticed a prioritization of US-based organizations in our dataset. While this could partly be due to the large news media market of the United States²⁰ and, certainly, a limitation of our own study (e.g., exclusion of DNI's data), it could also be due to "news deserts" (Stites 2011) that have been appearing throughout the country with negative consequences for local communities. Indeed, as Napoli has noted: "the declines in local journalism infrastructure create vulnerabilities that can potentially lead to diminished editorial independence between local media and government as well as between local media and other types of institutions" (Napoli 2021, 46). Or, as Lewis has argued regarding the Knight Foundation: "as legacy media organizations seemed paralyzed in resolving both problems, non-profit foundations have stepped forward to stimulate and underwrite innovation on a wide scale" (Lewis 2012, 312).

Following suit, we could argue the same about for-profit platform companies: these crises have served as a vehicle for platforms to legitimize their interventions in the industry to attempt capturing both media organizations and key governance stakeholders, as well as establish the rules and processes that drive innovation concerning news production and distribution, as well revenue sources. For example, in addition to money, Facebook and Google provide participants of their funding programs with credits for their advertising services, along with training activities and workshops, to best integrate platforms' technological infrastructure and tools (e.g., Facebook's Instant Articles²¹ or Google's Journalist Studio²²). Consequently, we reckon that these infrastructures, alongside funding intermediaries, create path dependencies for publishers, which are amplified by platforms'

²⁰ According to Harvard University's "Future of Media Project, there are nearly 3,100 newsrooms in the US. Available here: <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/futureofmedia/us-media-index>.

²¹ Instant Articles is Facebook's equivalent to Google's Accelerated Mobile Pages and, essentially, allows publishers to create Facebook-friendly content: <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/tools/instant-articles>.

²² Google's Journalist Studio is a collection of tools, like data visualization software, for journalists: <https://journaliststudio.google.com>.

network and lock-in effects (Mansell and Steinmueller 2020), especially for beneficiaries of platforms' funding programs, and, thus, endangers their autonomy, while creating more value (e.g., data) for platforms through platformization (Helmond 2015).

Network capture combines the notion of network governance (Caplan 2022; Sørensen and Torfing 2005) with that of capture to signify how platforms, namely Facebook and Google, are organizing the engagement of external actors and organizations, in which study we identified as "funding intermediaries," in the creation and actualization of funding activities. This is a reciprocal, interdependent relationship, with platforms relying on media stakeholders to facilitate their funding activities, while news organizations rely on tools, services, and network capacities provided by platforms. As such, funding intermediaries are not simply collaborators of platforms but stakeholders in the broader news media ecosystem and platform governance. Thus, their involvement in platforms' funding process has implications for the news industry's role in platform governance, as well as for platforms' strategy of platformization and, potentially, capture.

News media organizations, by receiving grants from platforms are opening themselves to an increased dependence on the latter and, as such, run the risk of getting captured by the platforms' interests, whims, and governance. As a result, capture here is also understood as a situation wherein platforms emerge as the only solution for news organizations to survive and cope with the recurring crises. In addition, distributing grants to news organizations can also be seen as a way for platforms to fend off or affect regulation. As a result, we assert that the platforms' strategic decision has not only been to distribute money through a complicated governance structure, but also to target parts of the industry that have been hurt by an ongoing crisis that the platforms themselves have aggravated, namely due to the large capture of the advertising industry. However, funding journalism ensures neither media capture, e.g., lack of critical coverage, nor regulatory capture, e.g., influencing regulation. Therefore, we approach capture as a political-economic concept to study platform power.

Finally, as Google's executives have said, these initiatives are "somewhere between philanthropy and self-interest" (Fanta and Dachwitz 2020, 38). In that sense, these initiatives should be seen as a subtle diversification and expansion of their lobbying activities, as is the case with corporate social responsibility programs. This echoes Lewis's claim about how the Knight Foundation, by shifting its focus "from journalism to information," was able to "expand its capital and influence as an agent of change among a broader set of fields, foundations, and funders" (Lewis 2012, 329). By extent, capture also signifies that, inadvertently and in lack of other compelling alternatives, news media get captured by becoming integrated in platforms' political and economic pursuits.

Concluding Remarks

At a time when more and more governments around the world consider or have already passed laws aiming to regulate the relationship between publishers and online platforms (Radsch 2022), we ought to have as better an understanding of the current situation as possible. We believe that our research project contributes, on the one hand, to an expansion of the analytical framework used to study media and infrastructural capture and, on the other hand, to the conceptual framework used to study platform governance and platform power, especially in relation to the news industry. We argue that, in addition to infrastructural dependency of publishers on platforms, the latter are now trying to capture networks of the news industry. In other words, the infrastructural capture of media by platforms has expanded to include the networks that media partake in.

The limitations of our research mainly derive from the difficulty of gathering data regarding platforms' funding beneficiaries, like the exact money that was allocated to them

either directly by platforms or indirectly through funding intermediaries. Often, platforms did not divulge financial specificities of their projects, or they simply revealed a range of possible grants that beneficiaries would get. As a result, transparency obligations stipulated by EU's Digital Services Act (Buri and van Hoboken 2021) or Canada's Online News Act (Turvill 2022) are welcome and should be further expanded. Moreover, due to the lack of an easily explorable database of platforms' funding projects, we had to manually gather, record, clean and analyze that data. In some cases, organizations were listed differently from one project to another, which resulted in having unnecessary duplicates, while our data may contain errors.

To this end, we will continue to update and correct our data, which is why we are making them public and invite other researchers to collaborate on improving them. Additionally, qualitative research that includes interviews with beneficiaries and/or intermediaries will greatly benefit our understanding of the advantages and risks of platform funding. Future studies should also incorporate European-oriented data from Google's DNI fund, take look into separate commercial deals with larger publishers and platforms' licensing programs, as well take a closer look at the role that funding intermediaries play in specific regions. Concerning our last suggestion, we believe that research should be conducted in places where state capture is still very prevalent, especially in countries of the Global South, to understand the motivations of news media organizations to participate in platforms' funding initiatives and subsequent implications.

For instance, in our paper, we noticed a high number of recipients from Brazil, which had the most beneficiaries in South America. In 2020, Brazil's Senate, ahead of the presidential election in 2022, approved the bill 2630/20²³, aimed at combating disinformation; more recently, an amendment was added to the bill by the House of Representatives seeking to create a right to remuneration for news publishers for the use of their content by online platform. Platforms have opposed this bill, with the support of various journalist associations, including Abraj, a funding intermediary identified in our dataset. Additionally, in 2021, bill 1354/2021 was introduced²⁴, drawing direct inspiration from Australia's NMBC, "[stipulating] that platforms with 'significant market power' pay 50% of the revenue obtained from the news published on the platforms to journalistic organizations.

As such, this example, alongside others from France or Canada, suggest that there could be a correlation between platforms' funding programs, especially their intensity, and the political will to pass regulation that would impact them. Such claims and possibilities merit further exploration. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether publishers' effort to "innovate their editorially oriented activities" with respect to dominant online platforms (Chua and Westlund 2022, 60) persists and blossoms further. At any rate, Facebook's²⁵ recent announcement, that they would stop paying publishers for content appearing on its News Tab to "support more creative initiatives," like its 'metaverse' (Toonkel and Hagey 2022), confirms DeVito's claim that "Facebook was not designed to give us the news" (2017, 753) and invites us to consider their funding initiatives as part of a 'reputation-washing' agenda in light of the global regulatory scrutiny (Fischer 2022).

Concluding, we assert that our article demonstrates, that we are in a situation where dominant platforms are trying to capture news organizations, primarily, by reinforcing the latter's infrastructural and network contingency rather than their financial dependency. In other words, news organizations are, mainly, growing dependent on the tools, services, and networks provided by platforms; and, to a lesser degree, on their financial aid, which is often insignificant, especially for smaller organizations. Subsequently, their relationship remains

²³ <https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/fichadetramitacao?idProposicao=2256735>.

²⁴ <https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/fichadetramitacao?idProposicao=2277800>.

²⁵ Now known as Meta Platforms.

deeply asymmetrical, principally, due to the informational opaqueness of many of these financial arrangements as, in most, cases, participants are bound by Non-Disclosure Agreements that hinder transparency and accountability, especially concerning equal treatment, as well as the capacity to share information among stakeholders within the news industry, which further reduces publishers' negotiating power and increases their dependency (Ouakrat 2020, 49). Additionally, the fact that we are in the dark in respect to organizations or initiatives, which were not selected for funding, further aggravates the problem.

Disclosure Statement

The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability Statement

Data openly available in *Open Science Foundation*, a public and open access repository that hosts datasets, and can be accessed via this link: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/6C7VQ>.

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Appendix – Tables

Table 2 - The top three countries in terms of total beneficiaries

| Country | Google | Facebook | Facebook/ Google | Grand Total |
|----------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>US</i> | 1455 | 543 | 207 | 2205 |
| <i>Brazil</i> | 389 | 26 | 9 | 448 |
| <i>Canada</i> | 211 | 36 | 93 | 422 |

Table 3 - Total beneficiaries of Facebook and Google's funding programs per continent

| Continent | GNI | FJP | GNI/FJP | Total |
|----------------------|------------|------------|----------------|--------------|
| <i>Africa</i> | 110 | 8 | 2 | 121 |
| <i>Asia</i> | 755 | 75 | 22 | 893 |
| <i>Europe</i> | 1685 | 108 | 12 | 1805 |
| <i>North America</i> | 1931 | 657 | 254 | 2842 |
| <i>South America</i> | 853 | 66 | 20 | 939 |
| <i>Oceania</i> | 172 | 22 | 11 | 205 |
| <i>Global</i> | 4 | 6 | - | 10 |
| Grand Total | 5510 | 942 | 321 | 6773 |

Table 4 – Examples of intermediaries who distributed grants on behalf of Facebook and/or Google (indirect funding/direct mediation)

| Beneficiaries | Country | Funding Project Title | Type of Organization |
|---|----------------|--|-----------------------------|
| <i>International Fact-Checking Network (Poynter)</i> | Global | FJP Fact-Checking Innovation Initiative | Non-Profit Organization |
| <i>Canadian Journalism Foundation (CFJ)</i> | Canada | FJP Local News Accelerator | Philanthropy |
| <i>School of Journalism, Ryerson University / DMZ</i> | Canada | The Digital News Innovation Challenge (DNIC) | Education |
| <i>Native American Journalists Association</i> | US | FJP Scholarships | Journalist Association |

Table 5 – Examples of intermediaries who reviewed applications on behalf of or in collaboration with Facebook and/or Google (indirect funding/indirect mediation)

| Beneficiaries | Country | Funding Project Title | Type of Organization |
|---|----------------|---|-----------------------------|
| <i>The Walkley Foundation</i> | Australia | FJP COVID-19 Australian News Relief Fund Program | Philanthropy |
| <i>The Discourse</i> | Canada | FJP Community Network Grants | News Media Organization |
| <i>Local Media Association (LMA)</i> | US | Local civic news organizations | Non-Profit Organization |
| <i>Institute for Nonprofit News (INN)</i> | US | GNI-INN Sponsorships Lab | Journalist Association |
| <i>University of Lagos</i> | Nigeria | GNI COVID-19 Vaccine Counter-Misinformation Open Fund | Education |

Table 6 – Examples of intermediaries who received funding from platforms to either support them or support other organizations through them (both direct and indirect funding/direct mediation)

| Beneficiaries | Country | Funding Project Title | Type of Organization |
|---|----------------|---|-----------------------------|
| <i>European Journalism Centre</i> | Europe | FJP European Journalism COVID-19 Support Fund | Non-Profit Organization |
| <i>Local Media Consortium (LMC)</i> | US | FJP Local civic news organizations | Journalist Association |
| <i>The Pulitzer Center</i> | US | FJP Local civic news organizations | Philanthropy |
| <i>Report for America</i> | US | FJP Local civic news organizations | News Media Organization |
| <i>Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications at Northwestern University</i> | North America | GNI The Data-Driven Reporting Project | Education |