

# Platforms, Powers and Liberty in the 21st Century

Ron Stephen<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital platforms in the twenty-first century has transformed not only everyday social and economic practices but also the structure of political authority. Platforms such as Google, Meta, and Amazon increasingly function as powerful intermediaries that shape access to information, communication, and public discourse. This commentary examines the growing influence of digital platforms through the lens of republican political theory, particularly Philip Pettit's concept of freedom as non-domination. While classical liberal approaches define freedom primarily as the absence of interference, a republican perspective highlights the risks posed by arbitrary and unaccountable power, even when it is not directly exercised. Drawing on insights from Hobbes, Machiavelli, and contemporary scholars of digital governance, the commentary argues that platforms operate as quasi-sovereign actors whose algorithmic systems regulate behaviour, curate visibility, and influence political participation in ways that remain largely opaque to users. The discussion situates platform power within broader debates on surveillance capitalism, algorithmic governance, and democratic accountability, emphasising how data monopolies, behavioural prediction, and content moderation reshape the conditions of freedom in digital societies. By conceptualising platforms as potential sources of domination, the commentary calls for renewed attention to transparency, regulatory oversight, and digital rights as necessary safeguards for preserving democratic autonomy in an era of technologically mediated power.

*Keywords: Digital liberty, Sovereignty, Surveillance, Tech giants, Algorithmic governance*

The 21st century has seen a rapid expansion of digital platforms among the common people. Almost the whole world population relies on Google, Meta, Amazon and numerous platforms for acquiring information, ensuring communication. Nowadays, people can even buy groceries just by sitting at home using Amazon, Blinkit, Flipkart and such other apps. The presence of digital platforms in every aspect of life shows

their severe influence. More than just a technological convenience, it represents a shift in political and social power. Historically, political authority was mainly understood as concentrated in the laws and frameworks of the state. Governments were seen as the main forces that create laws, regulate society, and determine the boundaries of freedom (Hobbes, 1909). Today, private platforms have also become new centres of authority.

<sup>1</sup>Undergraduate Student, Department of Political Science, St. Thomas College Palai Autonomous

They decide what content circulates, which voices are amplified or silenced, and how public debates evolve. Scholars such as Sunstein (2017) and Gillespie (2018) show that these decisions-whether technical or deliberative-have severe political consequences.

Through this analysis, I aim to examine the shift in power through the lens of republican political theory, particularly the concept of freedom as non-domination (Pettit, 1997). While liberal theory defines freedom as the absence of direct interference, republican thinkers argue that individuals remain unfree if they are subject to arbitrary power, even if that power is not exercised (Pettit, 1997). This is particularly relevant in analysing digital environments, where users appear free but are continuously regulated by algorithmic systems that cannot be seen or challenged (Zuboff, 2019). Digital platforms function as quasi-sovereign actors, operating without the safeguards normally applied to governments. Their power resembles a new kind of sovereignty-built on data extraction, algorithmic governance, and behavioural influence.

In the book 'Leviathan', Thomas Hobbes argued that people gave up some freedoms to a powerful ruler to avoid chaos (Hobbes, 1909). The "Leviathan" represents central, unquestioned power. Even though Hobbes talked about states, his idea helps us understand how big platforms today can control large numbers of people at once. Niccolò Machiavelli, in his book 'Discourses on Livy', believed that freedom is possible only when citizens actively participate in ruling themselves (Machiavelli, 1996). He stated that people must stay alert and keep leaders in check. His ideas matter today because platforms exercise power without much public oversight.

In modern political theory, Philip Pettit gives an important idea called 'freedom as non-domination' (Pettit, 1997). He says that a person is not free not only when someone directly interferes with them, but also when someone has the power to interfere whenever they

want. Even though this control does not feel forceful, it still influences what users choose and do.

Shoshana Zuboff talks about surveillance capitalism, where companies collect our behavioural data to predict and influence what we do (Zuboff, 2019). Nick Srnicek explains that large digital platforms use their economic power and control over the internet's infrastructure to strengthen their position (Srnicek, 2017). Cass Sunstein shows how algorithms create filter bubbles, making society more divided and breaking shared public discussion (Sunstein, 2017). Tarleton Gillespie, a Senior Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research New England, in his work *Custodians of the Internet*, examines how content moderation shapes public discourse (Gillespie, 2018). Manuel Castells analyses how digital networks alter social movements (Castells, 2012). Evgeny Morozov warns that digital technologies can create more authoritarian control instead of supporting democracy (Morozov, 2011).

Philip Pettit's idea of freedom as non-domination means freedom should not be controlled by powerful actors like big tech platforms. Using this theory we can witness how companies like Google, Meta, and Amazon influence people's online behaviours and political participation. The various platform-based companies emerged and reached their current stage through continuous evolution and changes (Pettit, 1997). They have also acquired an intense level of power. This occurs because companies like Google control access to most of the world's information, apps by Meta influence how people communicate and discuss politics, and Amazon affects the working of economies (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). These companies are powerful because of 1. Data monopoly 2. Behavioural prediction 3. Algorithmic control 4. Integrated digital ecosystems (Srnicek, 2017)

These platforms can shape our identity, our relationships, and how we understand political systems (Gillespie, 2018). Thomas Hobbes imagined the Leviathan

as a powerful state. But today, the modern digital platforms act as new “Leviathans.” They make their own rules (like terms and conditions), they give punishments such as bans and restrictions, they regulate content, and they surveil citizens (Hobbes, 1909; Morozov, 2011). These platforms exercise powers like governments, but without being accountable to the people. Platforms use hidden forms of power. Their algorithms decide things like: i) Which posts gain the most reach ii) Which political ideas spread online iii) Which posts are ignored. Users are controlled because they cannot fully understand, question, or change how these systems work (Sunstein, 2017; Gillespie, 2018). Digital platforms can help democracy by making it easier for people to access information. But they can also harm democracy by spreading misinformation, promoting divisive content, and allowing political ads targeted at specific individuals (Zuboff, 2019; Sunstein, 2017).

Digital platforms act like private rulers by using algorithms to control what people see and do. This reflects earlier concerns about algorithmic power and manipulation (Sunstein, 2017). In this digital era, to stay free, people need protection not only from the uncontrolled powers of government, but also from the growing powers of large tech companies (Pettit, 1997; Zuboff, 2019). The republican idea of liberty helps us understand the kind of power these platforms hold, especially the risk of arbitrary, unseen control (Pettit, 1997). Democracy becomes weaker when platforms control public conversations without any checks or supervision, particularly through content moderation and algorithmic curation (Gillespie, 2018; Sunstein, 2017).

To protect freedom today, we need transparency, accountability, and strong digital rights, which many scholars argue are essential for regulating platform power (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). The digital platforms can shape people’s political opinions by promoting some posts and hiding others. Social media helps people mobilise and participate in politics - showing

how strongly platforms influence political engagement. Platforms collect a huge amount of user data, which allows them to predict and influence people’s online behaviour (Zuboff, 2019). However, most of them do not trust platforms with their data and privacy. This suggests strong public concern about how platforms use personal information. A few big companies dominate the digital world, limiting user choice and increasing dependence on their services (Srnicek, 2017). Most people rely heavily on major platforms for everyday activities. Platforms can also worsen the quality of public discussion by pushing emotional or divisive content to increase engagement (Sunstein, 2017).

Digital platforms hold a lot of power, and this challenges our usual ideas of freedom and democracy. Using the idea of freedom as non-domination (Pettit, 1997), we can see that people can become dependent on platforms even if they are not being directly forced. Algorithms decide what people see, how they interact, and which political messages become popular. This means modern control or domination can happen through technology design, not only through laws or governments (Sunstein, 2017; Gillespie, 2018). Another key idea is the conflict between democracy and platform power. While digital platforms help people to come together and share their views, they are also worried about things like misinformation, algorithmic manipulation, and unequal visibility of political content (Sunstein, 2017; Morozov, 2011). These concerns support the idea that freedom is not just the absence of interference; it must include protection from arbitrary technological power (Pettit, 1997). It raises fundamental questions about accountability, transparency, and the conditions necessary for maintaining genuine freedom. There is a need for updated regulations on platforms, stronger digital rights, and greater public involvement in shaping how platforms operate .

The deep control over information, communication, and even human behaviour challenges the classical un-

derstanding of freedom (Hobbes, 1651). From a republican perspective, these platforms create a new form of domination—quiet, invisible, and technologically embedded (Pettit, 1997). The powers and capabilities of platforms in the contemporary period are far beyond what earlier thinkers could have anticipated. Their influence has crossed geographical, political, and social boundaries, expanding at an unprecedented scale. In such a context, protecting freedom today requires more than safeguarding privacy or individual rights. It demands broader democratic oversight, stronger regulation, and clearly defined limits on platform power (Zuboff, 2019; Srnicek, 2017). Ensuring transparency, accountability, and fairness in the digital sphere is essential. Only by establishing such frameworks can society preserve the core ideals of liberty and democracy in the 21st century.

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