

Platform Worlds

Platforms are everywhere. As digital objects we have social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Weibo), chat apps as platforms (LINE, Messenger, WhatsApp), e-commerce platforms (Amazon, Alibaba, Rakuten, Flipkart), streaming platforms (Netflix, Mubi, Niconico Video, Youku), and smartphones (iOS and Android). As places we have bookstores as platforms, storefronts as platforms. We have educational platforms, political platforms, business platforms. We have gone from the era of platform shoes as a distinct genre of footwear to platform everything. And this list does not even scratch the list of what is called a platform, or what is retroactively redescribed as one. The greatest success of *platform* within our language ecosystem is to have become something of a universal translation device. Almost anything can become a platform, if one merely calls it such. And thereupon it immediately gains prestige, cool, and economic value. “Platforms are eating our world,” as one business book on the topic succinctly put it.¹ To which we should add a caveat: platforms are as much technical objects and business practices as they are a keyword—with Exhibit A being the now-ubiquitous smartphone.

If keywords become the mediating nodes for the redescription of worlds—aggregators of currency, thought, conversation, cultural value, and labor—platform is without doubt the keyword of our time. We live in a platform world. And this “we” is not only the Anglophone linguistic subject. The term is remarkable for its portability to other languages in its

numerous transliterations: we have *purattofōmu* in Japanese or *peullaes-pom* in Korea, *plataformas* in Spanish, *plateforme* in French (possibly the root of the term), *píngtái* (平台) or “flat platform/stage” in Chinese. The world is in the midst of a “platform revolution,” to borrow the title of one recent tome, and a shift to “platform capitalism” in the formulation of another.² Academic discourse is as afflicted as other spheres in this count, with *platform* becoming the stand-in term for any media or device after the digital shift. *Contents* (*kontentsu*), a term that comes from a similar set of circumstances but a different lineage, is its partner term on the rise to linguistic and strategic dominance (rendered here as contents, reflecting the always-pluralized Japanese version of the word that I mostly follow here, unless explicitly referring to the non-Japanese context, or quoting from an English translation of Japanese that renders the term as *content*). Platform and contents organize industries, government strategies, and popular understandings of media. They are the keywords of our time. They have also become—true to the colonizing drive embedded in these terms—the keywords for all times, with Shakespeare rebranded as a content creator, and bookstores retroactively termed *platforms*.³

The Platform Economy offers a systematic examination of the term *platform* from *historical, geographical, cultural, institutional, and corporate* perspectives, providing a synthetic account of its discursive development and practical uses. The “economy” of the title is meant to designate both the transformation of the economy proper—its increased dependence on digital platforms and the emergence of the platform economy—and the metaphoric economy and circulation of the term *platform* as a keyword, which crosses domains and informs cultural and industrial forms of production. This book gives an overview of platform theory, traces the discursive and general economy of platform as a keyword for the media industries, and examines how the concept was unfolded in practice in the development of Japan’s mobile internet ecosystem, its *keitai*, or feature phones. It was Japan’s mobile internet project that became the blueprint for the now-dominant mobile “platforms” of Apple’s iPhone/iOS and Google’s Android phones—technical objects, to be sure, but more importantly points of transaction or interface that support contemporary capitalist forms of accumulation. This book tracks this and also the long-term impact of Japan’s mobile platforms on the Japanese internet, the regional impacts in East Asia, and the

transformation of the commercial internet writ large via the smartphone (or smartphonization of the internet, which bears the imprint of the Japanese feature phone legacy). While in Japan the mobile internet and the PC-based web are regarded as completely different beasts—to the extent that a deep dive into internet history can focus solely on the PC web and address the mobile internet only in conclusion—this book treats the mobile internet as a platform prototype for contemporary internet logics full stop.⁴ This book presents an analysis of the unfolding of platform that follows it from theoretical construct, to keyword, to planning, to product, to the lasting cultural and economic formation that it is today—from platform terminology to platform economy, as it were. Platforms are much more than just words, then; they are also technological and managerial constructs that mediate our relationship to our worlds, that create habits, addictions, and impulses (like the drive to check notifications), and just generally vie for our attention and shape our lives. Platforms designate not just particular technological entities but managerial constructs that shape us and the relations we enter into with other people, companies, and objects. This book offers one account of the rise of the platform as economic formation and manager of our lives.⁵

From Words to Worlds

Keywords matter. They operate on the world, they model the world, and they inscribe a series of operations (technical, strategic, financial) that transform the world. Never a deterministic process, the relation between words and worlds, or discourse and things, or theory and practice, is open, recursive, and dynamic. Patterns can be observed; regularities in discourse and regularities in practice can imprint one on the other.⁶ Platform theory leads to platform-building practice. Practice then acts back on this theory, leading to the ascendancy of, for instance, a transactional model of the platform that is central to contemporary economic forms of this object. *Contents* is similarly operationalized as a term, enacting a form of capture, a magical and even alchemic transformation of data or information into monetizable things.

Maurizio Lazzarato has argued that contemporary capitalism is characterized not so much by the *creation of products* but by the *creation of worlds*. In his 2004 book, *Les révolutions du capitalisme* (The revolutions

of capitalism), Lazzarato writes that the contemporary enterprise “creates not the object (the merchandise) but the world where the object exists. It creates not the subject (worker or consumer) but the world where the subject exists.”⁷ Capitalist valorization thus depends on the development of worlds. Lazzarato continues:

In reversing the Marxist definition, we can say that capitalism is not a mode of production but a production of modes, a production of worlds [*une production de mo(n)des*]. . . . The expression and the effectuation of worlds and of the subjectivities which are included therein, and the creation and realization of the sensible . . . precede economic production.”⁸

In this passage Lazzarato productively fuses *monde* (world) and *mode* (mode), relating capitalist *modes of production* to the *production of worlds*. In what follows I do to words what Lazzarato does to modes; I argue that capitalism and language cooperate in the production of wor(l)ds: words and worlds. Words operate on, model, and cocreate the business ideologies, strategies, and mechanisms that shape our world. To paraphrase Lazzarato: capitalist valorization depends on the development of words—keywords, like *contents* and *platforms*.

We can find keywords’ transformation of our world at work in financial markets, in CEO letters to shareholders, in tech writing, and in business literature in general.⁹ A crucial site from which words operate on worlds is in and through management theory, whose contributing writers come from a variety of disciplines, including management studies, economics, and organizational theory. Management theory emerges from what Walter Kiechel in his book on the management consulting industry calls an impetus toward “greater Taylorism”—the expansion of the Taylorist idea of rationalizing production from the production process narrowly defined to the entire firm or corporation.¹⁰ As Kiechel writes: “The secret intellectual history of the new corporate world is as much about the challenges companies faced, from competing with the Japanese in the 1970s to surviving a crisis in the global financial system in the twenty-first century, as it is about the conceptual solutions devised in response.”¹¹ Management theory

and management consulting are two adjoining sites where crisis meets proposed solution, and where language and analysis inaugurates a new era of corporate strategy and practice. While Kiechel focuses on the history of management consulting, *The Platform Economy* examines the near history of a set of keywords, discourses, and corporate practices that take shape in the 1990s and come to dominance in the mid-2010s in the form of what some have termed *platform capitalism*, and what I will refer to as the *platform economy*.¹² Management theory, government white papers, and technology writing are just some of the key sites from which this paradigm emerges.

It is from within business literature and management theory—or what we might call “greater management theory,” which includes professional consultants as well as academic economists, many of whom write popular books and have a consulting practice on the side—that we find the development of one of the main strands of platform theory that this book relies on: the model of platform as intermediary that facilitates third-party transactions.¹³ It is this model that informs many contemporary businesses that call themselves platforms today—from Uber to Amazon to YouTube. For this reason, management work and business literature are indispensable sources for developing a critical analysis and history of platform capitalism. Management theory is, in turn, buttressed by practices of platform building by corporations I examine in this book. Platform capitalism and the platform economy hence depend as much on the language around platforms (platform discourse) as the practical enactments of platforms (platform building). This account contrasts with the strong emphasis on platform-as-technology found within many books on the subject, particularly those within Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort’s *Platform Studies* book series, as well as the general turn to infrastructure studies within media studies. It aligns itself rather with work that attends to the vocabulary of digital media, “cultural logic of computation,” as David Golumbia puts it, or the punctuation of the digital shift to which Jeff Scheible calls our attention.¹⁴ Indeed, much as Golumbia sets out to “question not the development of computers themselves but the emphasis on computers and computation that is widespread throughout almost every

part of the social fabric,”¹⁵ this book sets out to narrate the platform as rhetorical device, as well as object. It also aims to narrate the transformative powers platforms and the conceptual models behind them have exerted on our world.¹⁶

In one of the earliest critiques of the terminological rise of platform, Tarleton Gillespie notes that “the discourse of the ‘platform’ works against us developing such [linguistic or terminological] precision, offering as it does a comforting sense of technical neutrality and progressive openness.”¹⁷ Indeed, as Gillespie convincingly argues, platform as keyword *operates* so effectively precisely because of the discursive fudge it performs, encompassing progressively more objects until capitalism itself is no longer *late* or *post-Fordist* but rather *platform* in kind—as Nick Srnicek’s *Platform Capitalism* suggests. No doubt, *platform capitalism* is a useful descriptive term for the centrality that platform companies—such as Alphabet (Google), Facebook, Alibaba, Amazon, Tencent, SoftBank, Netflix, and Flipkart—have in the construction of the contemporary form of capitalism. Platforms are even the mode of interface to the financial sector, wherein financial capital may itself be a subset of platform capitalism (dependent as it is on the one hand on digital infrastructure for its effectuation of trades, and on the other hand on the high valuation of platform companies for seeking return on investment). However, while platform capitalism is ultimately a useful critical formulation—one that I deploy here as a subset of post-Fordism as periodizing term—the very rise of the term *platform capitalism* should alert us to the very terminological expansionism that we are facing, and that this book narrates. Hence *The Platform Economy* is the title and operation of this book, which examines the metaphorical economy of terminology as it moves through and reorganizes fields, as much as the effects on the financial economy. The origins of the term *economy* in *oikonomia* or the *management* of a household further suits this book’s emphasis on the patterns of management (rhetorical and operational) that create the conditions for platform capitalism. It is the wider economy of platform as term and practice of management that is the object here.

This book takes stock of what a platform is today, and how it has become such. It offers a three-fold typology of the platform, defined as (1) a layered

structure often based on hardware, (2) a support for contents, and (3) a structure of mediation or enabler of financial transactions. It examines each in turn and emphasizes that most platforms are hybrids of the above. This book emphasizes history over typology, however, offering a recent history of the term *platform* and the practices associated with platform design, focusing on a time period near at hand but also light years away in internet time, beginning in the 1990s, and examining the following decade, before arriving at the present moment. It also tells the wider story of the emergence of the smartphone, and of how we came to pay for media via our phones and on the internet—a significant transformation in cultural attitudes and day-to-day media practices—via the Japanese story of platforms. In so doing, *The Platform Economy* examines the effects of platform-speak on media industries and their production and monetization of contents. It interrogates the discursive parameters and industry impacts of *platform* as keyword and as thing, weaving together an account of both platform theory and platform development in Japan. In doing so it also picks up on the ways that Japanese hardware such as automobiles, VCRs, and game consoles in turn informed work in business literature that leads, ultimately, to platform theory as we know it today. Japan, this book will claim, is a key site for the development of both contemporary platforms *and* platform theory. It is also a site from which the platformization of the internet can be seen most clearly, both in management theory and in practice. The principle guiding this book is that a firm critique of platform capitalism must be grounded in a better grasp of the development of platforms and platform theory in their historical and geographical diversity.

From Network to Platform

This is also, implicitly, the story of the displacement of *network* by *platform*. From the 1990s until at least the middle of the following decade, *network* was the keyword of the time.¹⁸ Coined in the early 1990s, “network society” was the phrase that described the social formation of the world connected by the internet, as described by prolific writers such as Manuel Castells in books such as *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996). Castells was writing from the perspective of a critical sociology. But the term *network* was equally operative within management literature of the 1990s, as detailed

by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. As Boltanski and Chiapello note, “The *metaphor of the network* . . . is deployed in all sorts of contexts” and becomes a master metaphor in management literature of the 1990s.¹⁹ For them (and I am in complete agreement with their assessment), this is significant, as “management literature is a medium offering the most direct access to the representations associated with the spirit of capitalism in a given era”; it is also “one of the main sites in which the spirit of capitalism is inscribed.”²⁰ Not merely representational, management literature is also operational, however: it is the site of description but also the site of inscription of ways of thinking about the world. Taken up by corporate actors, management theory is transformed into an applied theory, operating on and transforming the world.

What *network* was for the 1990s and the following decade, *platform* is for the mid-2010s onward. As Geert Lovink rightly remarks, 2016 marks the year of platform’s official ascendance to the throne of Keyword of Our Time.²¹ A couple of key events might be enumerated to explain why he suggests 2016 is the turning point. The year saw the publication of the two most significant popular management books on the topic—*Platform Revolution: How Networked Markets Are Transforming the Economy and How to Make Them Work for You* and *Matchmakers: The New Economics of Multisided Platforms* by a group of economists and management writers who had been pushing the term in their field for the previous decade (in both academic and public-facing writing).²² It was also the year of the Platform Society conference held at the Oxford Internet Institute, followed by two journal special issues on the topic. Srnicek’s *Platform Capitalism* similarly arrived on the scene in 2016, further solidifying the case that 2016 was the year platform officially became the keyword of our time.²³ Of course, despite the later debut of *platform* as a keyword in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and its coronation in 2016 with the declaration that we now exist within a platform society, economy, or capitalism, the argument in *The Platform Economy* is that management literature had been treating the term *platform* with considerable seriousness since at least the mid-1990s, making it congruent to the heyday of *network* as keyword—within managerial literature and outside it—even if it took a little longer for the term to catch on.

As they figure within management literature, the terms *platform* and *contents* serve to manage and effectuate the digital shift as much as they serve to describe it. In this sense we may recall Alan Liu's critical call to analyze management discourse as a site of the management of the transition from industrialism to postindustrialism. Liu writes:

A cultural studies approach might show that the alignment of the new discourse with our new economy is the result of a historical process of *making things fit*. That process we now call management, the modern theory of civilization. God begat Enlightenment reason, which begat industrial scientific management, which in turn begat postindustrial management theories that synonymize the progress of civilization and management without any remainder.²⁴

The terms *platform* and *contents*, and the swirling, voluminous density of business and popular writing around them, suggest that the keywords are operationalized to, as Liu says, *make things fit*. After all, as Boltanski and Chiapello argue, management theory and its keywords do not just represent the new spirit of capitalism; they also effectuate it. Ultimately, the rise of the conceptual model of platform as universal mediation device within management theory and its effectuation in actual platform practice marks the infiltration of managerial logics more fully into the social body, producing what we now call the platform society.

Platforms in Japan

To better understand this effectuation, *The Platform Economy* departs from the American context that is usually figured as the homeland of platform capitalism. Against the still overwhelming emphasis on U.S. platforms within popular and academic writing, and also contrary to the treatment of the platform in a resolutely presentist mode, this book will narrate the what, where, and how of the platform economy by way of a focus on Japan—a fading platform superpower. There are other such fading superpowers, such as France, in the parallel case of its Minitel system, which Julien Mailland and Kevin Driscoll have recently argued offers an early formulation of the platform concept.²⁵ That said, by other measures, Japan

makes a good case for it being a platform progenitor. It generated some of the crucial platforms we refer to, whether these are video cassette recorders in the late 1970s, Nintendo Entertainment Systems in the 1980s and 1990s, or the mobile internet system called i-mode in the late 1990s and the following decade. These platforms in turn impact the Japanese internet ecology of the early twenty-first century, and the smartphone experience globally. The very conceptual framework of the “platform business” is closely related to the structure of payment for contents implemented with the development and rollout of the world’s first widespread mobile internet platform—i-mode, released by telecom giant NTT Docomo in February 1999, becoming what one writer called “the biggest phenomenon since the Walkman.”²⁶ I-mode inaugurated and formatted a mobile internet experience predicated on services that became a model for the now-dominant mobile operating systems, Google’s Android and Apple’s iOS. These are platforms and sources of monetization for their respective companies, which in turn transformed the internet from the venture capital-supported, free services model of the web to the mobile internet as the app-based and increasingly fee-supported model (whether these are for paid apps, or in-app purchases). To be sure, the ad-supported, eyeball-and-data-seeking “free internet” ethos of the web persists, but it does so in coexistence with a paid model that was pioneered in the mobile realm in the late 1990s in Japan.

That for which we pay goes by the moniker *contents*—as significant a keyword as its partner term *platform*. Contents is hence also part of the narrative here, and indeed one of the particularities of Japanese platforms has been the closer integration of contents into the platforms, and the distinct interfaces that this integration gives rise to. The pervasiveness of the term *contents* (again, always in the plural form in Japan) in fact precedes that of platforms. The term has often been tied to distinct types of media in Japan, such as anime and manga and video games, before it became tied to mobile media. Contents exists in close relation to platforms. There is, as Thomas Lamarre observes, “a generative interval . . . between platform and content” that supports a market for—in the context he is writing—home video games and their consoles.²⁷ By the early twenty-first century, the mobile contents industry in Japan exploded into view with internet-enabled

mobile phones; the mobile contents market is huge and still growing.²⁸ It was one of the reasons the mobile internet caught on at all.

The financial success and cultural impact of the mobile contents market was in turn one of the reasons it became a keyword, eventually finding its way into “Cool Japan” national policy-making, which attempts (often rather crudely and ineffectively) to capitalize on the global popularity and exportability of Japanese animation, character goods, and eventually food and cosmetics brands.²⁹ Despite the continuing uptick in the market value for mobile contents, however, the rise of platforms is also a moment that sees the decline in the discursive weight and import of contents. Consequently, we live within not *contents capitalism* but *platform capitalism*, and today business strategists urge us to avoid the “content trap,” relying instead on the connectivity that these contents make possible—in other words, business owners are urged to focus on connective platforms rather than contents alone.³⁰ From a critical perspective on management of the creative industries, Chris Bilton similarly notes a shift from an emphasis on content to its forms of delivery. Contrasting the current situation to the days in the late 1990s when industry operators believed that “content is king,” Bilton writes: “Attention has shifted from the *what* of content to the *how* of delivery, branding, and customer relationships—in other words, towards management.”³¹ By the same token, just as game software and game platform are codependent, so too the monetization of contents and the success of platforms are codependent. I-mode’s success is usually explained in relation to the contents-rich experience it offered. Its lucrative contents market fostered a bubble that in turn produced some of the most important Japanese platforms today: social gaming giants GREE and Mobage, chat app and platform LINE, and the video streaming site Nico-nico Video all produce their own content, and with the exception of LINE they grew thanks to their position as contents producers for *keitai* mobile phones (in LINE’s case it aimed for the smartphone market but used many of the elements found in i-mode). These, in turn, have impacted and are impacted by other Asian platforms, including the Chinese streaming site Bilibili, and Chinese and Korean chat apps WeChat and KakaoTalk. Platforms beget contents that in turn beget platforms.

Complementing this platform-building practice, management writers in Japan also theorized the platform at a very early moment. Within the platform theory that emerges from Japanese management studies in the early 1990s, a platform is both something technological premised on a layered structure (much as software runs on a hardware platform) and, crucially, a mediating mechanism or intermediary between multiple parties, usually in the context of a financial transaction. This latter sense of platform as intermediary is now one of the mainstream denotations of the term within management studies in North America and Europe, within the subfield of microeconomics, and is increasingly prominent within critical platform studies as well. Hence, i-mode does not so much invent the platform as it actualizes or effectuates what was already incipient or projected within management theory, albeit in a manner quite unique, and with major repercussions for the state of mobile media and indeed the internet in toto today—not only in Japan but also, via its channeling into Android and iOS, around much of the world.

The premise of this book is this, then: if we want to know why the term *platform* is so prominent in our time, we must pay attention to the developments of platform theory and practices in Japan. To put it more forcefully: we cannot understand the development of the platform economy until we route the history of the platform through Japan. Yet as this project will make clear, giving an account of platforms from Japan does not mean to ignore the rest of the world. This aspires to be a transnational and comparative account of platform genesis, tracking where and how platforms develop in Japan, the various intersections of U.S. and French discourse that overlap with the Japanese platform project, and the subsequent globalization of the platform via Apple and Google's mobile phone projects. It moves from the national and transnational construction of the i-mode mobile internet platform in Japan, to the global markets forged by iOS and Android, back to the regional development of chat apps in East Asia. This is, as the subtitle says, a story about Japanese platforms in the context of their transformation of the global commercial internet. (With the term *commercial internet*, I refer to the internet as a transactional, commercial space rather than the other military, educational, or community-driven aspects of the internet.) Concretely, this book examines the following aspects of digital culture in turn: *contents* as term in chapter 1, exploring

the meaning and development of the term prior to platform discourse; the emergence of platform discourse and platform theory in North America and Japan, focusing on hardware and contents platforms in chapter 2; and turning to the development of the transactional theory of the platform in chapter 3. In chapter 4 I turn to platform building in the case of the Japanese mobile internet systems and i-mode in particular; in chapter 5 we see how the paid-for contents market that i-mode created in turn gave rise to some of Japan's most important platform companies (namely the social game developers and platforms GREE and Mobage, and Niconico Video, the YouTube of Japan), and analyze the unique synthesis of contents and platforms that marks Japan's contemporary platform producers, such as Dwango's Niconico Video. Finally, the conclusion addresses the regional development of chat apps as platforms, looking at Japan's LINE, Korea's KakaoTalk, and China's WeChat in a comparative light, and positioning these apps as the inheritors of the i-mode platform concept. As can be glimpsed from this trajectory, this book shifts among the national, transnational, comparative, global, and regional scales, each of which allows us to tell a different aspect of the platform story. This national-transnational account of the platform routed through Japan's mobile internet experiment draws inspiration from mobile media scholar Gerald Goggin's persuasive approach to the mobile phone as an exemplary media object that requires a global approach.³²

What begins in Japan with i-mode becomes the agent of global market penetration in the form of iPhone/iOS and Google/Android, which currently have a 99 percent market share for smartphones. This book narrates a view onto the global development of platforms and contents from the particular angle of Japanese platform development, and its associated contents bubble.³³ In recounting the platform story of Japan, this book tells a story that has relevance to anywhere in the world experiencing the rise of the platform-mediated commercial internet, and the attendant transformation of lifeworlds that this brings.

The Japanese Corporate Genesis of the Platform Concept

This book purposefully errs, then, on the side of an overemphasis on Japanese corporations, management writers, economic actors, and platform developers as the loci for platform production, past and present—albeit with

a concluding shift to consider the wider East Asia region. This emphasis is a necessary countermeasure to the presentism of tech writing and the corresponding fixation on the United States alone as the site of platform production and platform politics. Of course, the danger here is of replacing the by-now familiar narrative of American platform expansionism with a Japanese one, replacing one imperial power (the United States) with another imperial power (Japan), whose history of imperialist expansion into East Asia remains an open wound in the region to this day. That said, there are reasons for this focus on Japan, and reasons why the economic model of platforms develops in Japan when it does.

The larger context for the development of industrial platform theory and practice in Japan—what we might best describe as the *Japanese corporate genesis of the platform concept*—requires an understanding of how early theorists of platforms were preoccupied by what they saw as a shift from an automobile-centric industrial economy (albeit one already shifting under post-Fordist and Toyotist modes of production) to a post-industrial information economy. The genesis of the platform concept takes place alongside developments in hardware manufacture and insights gleaned from the adoption of technologies. The theoretical and organizational shift to a model of the postindustrial economy had been underway since at least the 1960s and was the subject of frequent white papers and government reports, media theorization, and management theory.³⁴ Writings on the information society and the information industries start with some fanfare in the 1960s and gain pace during the 1970s. By the 1990s era of platform theory, writers were already primed to regard developments in the information technology sector as integral for guiding Japan's industrial transformations moving forward. This accompanies a general shift in industrial emphasis from hardware to cultural “software” or “contents” that was taking place over the 1980s, due in part to the growing understanding that *contents* ownership was what led to the adoption or failure of technological systems. (Sony's takeaway from losing the VHS-Beta video format wars of the late 1970s and early 1980s was that it needed to acquire and control contents producers, hence its acquisition of Columbia Pictures in 1989; soon after, its hardware rival Matsushita acquired MCA.)

In parallel to the above, the lesson of the 1980s for Japan's hardware makers like Fujitsu was that formerly expensive hardware like computers would be commoditized (i.e., become increasingly a battle to the bottom price-wise, eating into profits) and that the future for computer companies lay not in hardware per se but rather in the Microsoft model of selling software, or cultural contents. A final part to this narrative is the longtime importance of national telecommunications company NTT (formerly Denden Kōsha), which was privatized in 1985. Its mobile unit, NTT Docomo, was at the forefront of introducing mobile services to Japanese consumers, first as pagers, then mobile phones, and finally the mobile internet. One of its most important and lasting initiatives was the platform genesis of i-mode. Yet even before this, NTT had developed experiments in internet services under the aegis of the "Captain System"—a Japanese interactive videotex system that was the less successful contemporary of France's Minitel. These experiments with platforms led management theorists to hone the vocabulary and theory of the platform. This also requires us to track the longitudinal effects of platform development on the Japanese web since then, as well as mobile media generally, which have made Japan's initiatives into our lived, ambient environment.³⁵

The era under consideration was one wherein Japan was briefly seen as the world's future. Looking back at this future formation tells us something important about our present platform economy. As Chalmers Johnson notes about a different era of Japan-watching, this future formation sometimes tells more about transformations predicted in a writer's home country than about futurity per se. Johnson has summarized the discourses around Japan's "economic miracle" years from outside Japan as very often being more about "revealing home country failings in light of Japanese achievements" than aimed at explaining the economic miracle on its own terms.³⁶ Managerial studies around the Japanese automobile sector repeated this gesture, pointing to the Japanese auto manufacture as a site from which to gain managerial know-how, and to correct the ills of American manufacture. This was epitomized in entities like MIT's International Motor Vehicle Program (IMVP), whose mandate was to bring this Japanese manufacturing know-how to the U.S. context (and conversely, to show Japanese companies how they might interface with American workers as they were

setting up factories in the United States). Books that came out of it include James Womack, Daniel Jones, and Daniel Roos's classic 1990 business book examining Toyotist versus Fordist models of production, *The Machine That Changed the World*. This analysis of Japan as an example to be copied is replicated in the literature around the mobile internet project of i-mode as platform in the early twenty-first century—placing the i-mode mobile internet alongside Toyotism and the Japanese economic miracle in terms of global impact. In the first years of the century, i-mode was regarded as the future of mobility, and other countries were urged to follow in Japan's footsteps. As Mark McLelland, Haiqing Yu, and Gerard Goggin recently put it: "The innovation of the *i-mode* system that saw Internet connectivity skyrocket in Japan tends to be what is now remembered, at least in the Anglophone literature, about Japan's Internet history."³⁷ This techno-Orientalist vision of Japan's mobile internet as the future has had real effects, including the impact on the eventual development of the smartphone in the U.S. context.

There are also institutional reasons for the focus on Japan, foremost among them the relatively national quality of telecommunications companies ("telecoms") at the time of the historical genesis of platforms. That this narrative is located mostly in Japan is a methodological decision that mirrors the nation-centric operation of telecommunications companies—typically national monopolies providing telephone and data communications services. In the mobile sphere on which I focus here, this situation changed by the early 2010s with the rise of iOS and Android as globally dominant mobile platforms, which in turn transformed the role of telecoms from the mediators of commerce to what are often called the "dumb pipes" that simply provide telephone and data services for their subscribers. This marks a shift from a moment when national telecoms giants controlled the mobile space to what is a *de facto* global regime of standards and shared operating systems—in the form of Android and iOS.

Android and iOS are a duopoly that model themselves on the types of mobile phones popular in Japan since 1999: internet-enabled, function-rich phones, linked together by systems of commerce that allowed for the selling of digital commodities (contents) such as ringtones, mobile games, and so on. The narrative told here, then, is one wherein a certain aspect of what was once regarded as the world's future—Japan's mobile technology

and uses—becomes the basis for the globally diffused smartphone-enabled commerce we see today by taking Japan out of the equation.

These are the circumstances under which we revisit the Japanese platform moment and its aftermaths. This book took shape at a moment when, alongside the waning of Japan's i-mode system and mobile internet-enabled "feature phones," BlackBerry OS (another important mobile platform precursor, though predominantly organized around providing email in its early years) and Windows phones also went into terminal decline, to the unique benefit of iOS and Android, which became the globally dominant standards. It was written at a moment that also saw the increasing platform domination of local markets by American giants Apple, Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Netflix, with attendant anxieties around this domination, and questions about what this global dominance of U.S.-origin transnational tech companies means for cultural production throughout the world.

The current global hegemony of American platforms raises the specter of what Dal Yong Jin has termed *platform imperialism*, wherein the overwhelming global dominance of U.S. operating systems and web platforms on the global internet landscape and on the power over the distribution of cultural goods requires a resuscitation of the "cultural imperialism" debates of the 1980s and 1990s.³⁸ Cultural imperialism is a framework deployed in political-economic theories of globalization, wherein concerned critics note the erasure of cultural differences under the sameness of American culture as it was distributed and consumed around the world (particularly via Hollywood films, American television shows, and fast food culture). Fredric Jameson engages closely with this position, arguing that there "is a fundamental dissymmetry between the United States and every other country in the world, not only third-world countries, but even Japan and those of Western Europe."³⁹ Through institutions like NAFTA and GATT trade agreements, U.S. cultural goods are made to circulate through the world, provoking anxiety around what Jameson calls "the violence of American cultural imperialism and the penetration of Hollywood film and television," which result in the "destruction of those traditions," cultural and otherwise, in target countries.⁴⁰ This understanding is given granular political-economic detail in studies like *Global Hollywood*, which exhaustively examines the economic and institutional conditions

for Hollywood's global cultural domination.⁴¹ In the late 1990s, cultural studies and postcolonial theorists pushed back against the cultural imperialism framework, advocating a more nuanced approach to Hollywood and American cultural circulation, acknowledging local difference in interpretation, cracks in U.S. mass cultural hegemony, and multidirectional forms of cultural circulation (the popularity of anime, for instance, or Korean dramas). Yet Jin and others reopen the question of cultural imperialism in the context of the increasing platform domination by Silicon Valley giants. Jin writes:

The idea of platform imperialism refers to an asymmetrical relationship of interdependence between the West, primarily the U.S., and many developing powers—of course, including transnational corporations. . . . Characterized in part by unequal technological exchanges and therefore capital flows, the current state of platform development implies a technological domination of U.S.-based companies that have greatly influenced the majority of people and countries.⁴²

In sum, Jin suggests that cultural imperialism may have been succeeded by platform imperialism, requiring a different focus for political-economic analysis. Our attention should therefore shift from the cultural content of goods to the supposedly neutral platforms that mediate these cultural goods—and their disproportionately U.S. ownership.

Should the intermediation of local cultural production by American giants concern us any more than national telecoms dictating what could and could not be seen and engaged with in previous decades? The platform imperialism thesis suggests that we answer in the affirmative. Maybe this *does* matter in ways that we are just beginning to grasp—such as in the ways Netflix's vertical integration and global penetration promises to reshape what counts as contents, for better or worse, or the ways Facebook's data collection and parsing of users into targetable microsegments has had tangible negative effects on elections and political sentiment globally (to put it mildly). The mere posing of the question of platform imperialism is an important starting point for larger dialogues around the current digital media ecology. Indeed this is an issue I will return to in chapter 5 when addressing the particular forms of interface in Japanese platforms.

On the other hand, I would also signal a note of caution around posing the question of American imperialism, insofar as suggesting the endangerment of Japanese local culture both presumes a local focus (or evacuates the power struggles in the production of such a thing) and tends to erase Japan's own imperialism (cultural or otherwise). Indeed, the very counternarrative of the Japan-origin platforms that this book narrates—while important in counterbalancing an overweening focus on U.S. platforms and telling another history of platform development at its best—at worst threatens to repeat a Japanese imperialist narrative of developments radiating from Japan outward to elsewhere in Asia. Nowhere does the imperial narrative of platforms—and the impact of platform and contents discourse—become more clear than in the merger of Kadokawa and Dwango, which I turn to briefly.

A Contents-Platform Merger

To find a concrete example of the articulation of and corporate-level struggle against Silicon Valley's platform domination, the pitfalls of the platform imperialism critique, and the pervasiveness of the contents-platform discourse, we need look no further than the Kadokawa–Dwango merger of 2014. This was a Japanese reprisal of the AOL–Time Warner merger done almost fifteen years earlier, under a different set of circumstances. On October 1, 2014, Kadokawa, one of Japan's largest publishers and aspiring media conglomerates, completed a merger with Dwango, owner and founder of Niconico, Japan's most culturally significant video platform. Pundits speculated about the reasons for this merger and questioned its financial merit. Kadokawa—the adopted name of this merged company—has since announced voluntary retirements and large-scale restructuring; share prices have dropped, leading some to view the merger as simply an attempt to bury the publisher's debt.⁴³ Yet this merger is fascinating for the ways the explanations for it articulate a media strategy that reflects, on the one hand, the emergence of a new set of keywords for the current moment, and on the other, changing conceptions of media corporations that now see technology companies such as Amazon and Netflix as the behemoths against which they must position themselves.

Significantly for this book, the transliterated English terms *platform* and *contents* animate justifications for this move toward media conglomeration.

At the May 14, 2014, press conference where the merger was initially announced, Dwango founder and CEO and former Kadokawa chairman, Kawakami Nobuo, explained the terms of the merger in the following manner: “Kadokawa and Dwango have both developed contents and platforms—Kadokawa for the real world, and Dwango for the world of the Net. Having offered both contents and platforms for the net world and the real world, the compatibility of these two companies united as one is extremely good.”⁴⁴ The merger promised to create what CEO Kadokawa Tsuguhiko effused as “the Platform of the Rising Sun” (*hi no maru no purattofōmu*)—the “rising sun” being a nationalist code word for Japan during the wartime, imperial era of the 1930s to 1940s, during Japan’s imperialist incursion into Asia.⁴⁵ That this term returns at this moment of time is symbolic insofar as it evokes an oppositional narrative of Japanese versus U.S. platforms (sometimes figured as invading “black ships,” recalling the Western countries’ forced opening of Japan in the nineteenth century) that ultimately supports a nativist nationalism. It is in this nationalism that we also see most clearly the pitfalls of the platform imperialism hypothesis; even as it draws attention to the political–economic dominance of U.S.-origin platforms, it also authorizes a problematic cultural and economic nationalism that easily falls into line with the Cool Japan propaganda of the government. In doing so it shores up the Cold War paradigm of Japan–U.S. relations and what Naoki Sakai has called the “schema of co-figuration,” wherein Japan always defines itself in relation to the West, or the United States.⁴⁶

The Kadokawa–Dwango merger, its background in Japanese platform development, and the terminological explanation of it build on years of transformations in how media work and how media are discussed in Japan; this merger also marks the consolidation of the story told in this book about the rise of Japanese platform theory and its relationship to Japanese contents and platform practice. Kadokawa the publisher and media conglomerate embraced the term *contents* and its strategic media implications earlier in the century; Dwango for its part benefited immensely from one of the earliest implementations of the platform concept in the form of NTT Docomo’s i-mode project. As I have suggested, the prominence of the terms *platform* and *contents* within the explanation of the merger must

also be situated within a geopolitics of increasing platform domination by North American companies; but in part it was also directed at a series of stakeholders—from shareholders to media corporations to the government—who were themselves enraptured by the familiar terms *contents* and *platforms*. Particular though this merger was, the keywords deployed to articulate the rationale of the merger are symptomatic of their hold over their target audience. They also signal shifts that lead to the rekindling of a dream dreamt in the 1990s in North America and Europe about the coming merger of content and distribution pipelines, one that fueled the failed merger between Time Warner and AOL in 2000. The failed future of Time Warner and AOL was rebooted in the Kadokawa–Dwango merger, this time within the frame of contents and platforms. The Kadokawa–Dwango merger hence reflects the organizational power and causal efficacy of the very terms *contents* and *platforms*, and the managerial discourses and practices that subtend them. This book sets out to interrogate this vocabulary, the better to understand the transformative power of these words along with the associated business strategies and practices embedded within them.

Platformization and Method

A model of imperial expansion or platform enclosure also animates discussion around the transformation or enclosure of the web, which we find in both popular journalistic accounts and critical analyses. “The Web Is Dead,” proclaimed *Wired* magazine on the cover of its September 2010 issue. Others, slightly less dramatically, describe the enclosure of the web under the rubric of *platformization*. In his introduction to a special issue on platform politics, Joss Hands writes:

The Internet is vanishing: as its ubiquity increases, it has also become less and less visible in the production and experiences of network culture. Indeed, many of the operations that used to typify the Internet are now funnelled through so-called “platforms.” We do not have a single Internet anymore, but rather a multiplicity of distinct platforms, which . . . are broadly defined as online “cloud”-based software modules that act as portals to diverse kinds of information, with nested applications that aggregate content, often generated by “users” themselves.⁴⁷

In a similar vein, Anne Helmond has written persuasively about the increasing “platformization of the web” attendant to the rise of Facebook and its tentacular APIs that have reconfigured the internet into a trackable and increasingly walled-garden-style space.⁴⁸ As new as this phenomenon is, this platformization of the internet itself is also a *return* to an earlier model of the web, one found in AOL on the one hand and the Japanese mobile web on the other. This historical repetition or recurrence requires a careful consideration of what exactly is being repeated—that is, the walled-garden paradigm of AOL and Japan’s mobile phones.

Unlike the earlier keyword *network*, which offered a sense of openness, freedom, and rhizomatic extensivity that preempts efforts to control the network, the platform concept is generally applied to the definitive closure of the network, the reigning in of a moment of perceived freedom that the open web was to offer (debates I revisit in chapter 2). For this reason, looking at an earlier moment of platformization provides a critical antidote to the more ahistorical or romantic narratives of decline. It is this need to revisit the Japanese mobile web experience as a formative moment in platformization that requires us to tell a rather different story than that early and prescient one told by the editors and authors of a groundbreaking volume on Japanese mobile phone culture, Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Misa Matsuda’s *Personal Portable Pedestrian*. Examining the immense cultural impact of i-mode, and focusing in particular on the lives of its users, *Personal Portable Pedestrian* refuses to adopt the futurist narrative that Japan’s then-present form of mobile culture would necessarily become the blueprint for mobile communications around the world—a popular sentiment at the time, expressed in the Japanese press as well as the breathless global media coverage of Japan’s mobile technology and culture.⁴⁹ As Mizuko Ito writes, *Personal Portable Pedestrian* aimed “toward a certain parochialization and grounding of the Japanese case. The development of keitai [Japanese mobile] uses and cultures is a complex alchemy of technological, social, cultural, economic, and historical factors that make wholesale transplantation difficult.”⁵⁰

Now, more than a decade and a half later, we need to revisit i-mode, under a different set of historical circumstances and with a different critical imperative. The global rollout of Android phones and iPhones (while

by no means evenly distributed) has expanded aspects of the Japanese mobile phone experience such that it now impacts global mobile culture.⁵¹ Among other things this includes a generalization of the sense that one should pay for digital contents on the internet—something key to the Japanese mobile experience but far less central to other geographies where the PC-centric “free” internet has become the norm. If this is a story about the *platform business* of Japanese phones, it is in part because the legacy of this business model informs digital platforms today. In this sense I follow the lead of Noriko Manabe, who places emphasis on the business models of the i-mode experiment, arguing, “It was the business model and technological infrastructure that made these Japanese innovations viable in the crucial experimental stages.”⁵² The Japanese mobile phone has also had a lasting impact on the web experience there. It has been a core element to Japanese internet culture in general, as a forerunner of mobile e-commerce, a generative zone from which some of its most prominent game and video companies emerged, and the source for the current vocabularies used to describe it. It also had a transformative effect—via iOS and Android—on the global commercial internet as a whole.

In sum, in light of the platformization of the internet taking place today, it is time to de-parochialize the Japanese mobile internet story, revisiting the crucial role mobile technological developments and their business models played in the language, theory, and practice of Japan’s digital business and media ecology. It is this story of the platformization and commercialization of the internet that this book tells, through the angle of Japanese managerial discourse and practice around the term. It is also the (inevitably partial) story of Japan’s current media ecology, as it is impacted by the language of contents and platforms.⁵³

In looking for models of how to analyze the relation between management and media practice, and the impact of words on worlds, I draw methodological inspiration from works that take the impact of managerial thinking seriously. Two such sources already mentioned are Boltanski and Chiapello’s sociology of capitalism in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* and Liu’s close analysis in *The Laws of Cool* of managerial discourse, out of which he reads a new image of the subject, and the model of the “cool” workplace within knowledge work in Silicon Valley. Another is

Wendy Chun's careful attention to the intersection of discourses, their ideological presumptions, and computational practices across her work on new media in *Programmed Visions* and *Updating to Remain the Same*. Chun interrogates how language matters, how words and metaphors have effects, demonstrating how one must range across popular and scientific discourses and practices to arrive at an image of new media, or software, or—in the case of this book—the platform. Recent works on film and media theory press us to think more broadly about the sources and sites of media theorization.⁵⁴ One of these alternative sites of theorization must certainly be publications from management studies, whose work on platforms I read both symptomatically and media theoretically. Recent work in media industry studies, such as Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, and Avi Santo's edited collection *Making Media Work*, has led the way in arguing for the need to pay attention to practices of management and managerial discourse.⁵⁵

Media studies of late has kept a close eye on technologies and infrastructures, data and design. It has paid less attention to the economics of platforms, and the business discourses around them. Media industry studies is the exception to this, with work by Jennifer Holt, Alisa Perren, Alexander Zahlten, and others continually pointing to the importance of engaging with industry discourse—and this book positions itself within this subfield.⁵⁶ That said, when media studies addresses business, it often does so through the frameworks of labor, political economy, and ethnographies of production. While this book is indebted to the pathways opened by all three of these approaches, it takes a more expansive view of work from economics and management studies—treating it both as ideological formations *and* as a form of theorization worth taking seriously, if for no other reason than that it is productive of platform realities. As such, this book engages with the vocabulary and business strategies of media industries more than the labors, technologies, or ground-level practices, heeding David Nieborg's call to better integrate political-economic and management studies approaches to network businesses.⁵⁷

The Platform Economy ranges widely in order to arrive at a holistic account of the platform that treats managerial theory, platform-building practice, and the impacts of both on contemporary platforms. It offers an

account of Japan's mobile internet that traces its impact inside and outside the mobile market, offering a different history of the internet (heeding a crucial call for internationalizing internet studies, to borrow the title and argument of Gerald Goggin and Mark McLelland's 2009 book), and a unique account of platforms.⁵⁸ This account embraces what Michelle Cho calls "the existence of multiple internets that are determined by language, regulatory measures, software interfaces, and communications infrastructures," showing the contours of the paid model of the internet as it emerges in Japan.⁵⁹ It equally draws on the rich discussions around platforms, from Tarleton Gillespie's and José van Dijck's rich accounts of connective media, to Bogost and Montfort's hardware-centric work on platform studies, to Helmond's work on the platformization of the web, to Jin's political-economic reading of platforms, to Lamarre's work on regional platforms.⁶⁰ Present here too is a critical engagement with the extensive publications of Japan's internet business elite, from Dwango CEO Kawakami Nobuo, to i-mode cocreators Natsuno Takeshi and Matsunaga Mari, to Kadokawa CEO Kadokawa Tsuguhiko. These provide not only firsthand accounts of the systems they create but also testaments to the discursive power these words possess, and the effects they have on business thinking and strategy. Finally, this book situates itself within a lineage of critical inquiries into the history of Japanese management and industrial formations, including Simon Partner's *Assembled in Japan* and Chalmers Johnson's *MITI and the Japanese Miracle*.

What emerges out of this is a prehistory of the platform as we know it—a retelling of the emergence of platform theory, an examination of emergent platform practice around Japan's internet-enabled mobile phones, and a tracing out of the impacts of the mobile phone experiment on Japanese and global commercial internet cultures.

Overview

The platform is, then, the central object of engagement of this book. Yet platform theory and discourse cannot be understood without recourse to the discourse around contents—the things that platforms carry and contain. Chapter 1, "Contents Discourse: A Platform Prelude," hence offers

a thorough consideration of *contents*, a term that emerges in North America prior to platforms and designates something like the commodity value of a cultural good in a postdigital world. *Contents* is a term that comes into its own at a time when (1) anxieties about the ability to monetize cultural products (from films to books to video games) coincide with (2) the prospects of new, digitally mediated markets and transaction settlement for the products, and (3) the rise of a powerful new delivery platform in the form of i-mode. This chapter examines the rise of contents discourse in the early 1990s in Japan (albeit with some attention to the U.S. context as well), and the manner in which the term becomes attached to cultural goods representative of Japanese cultural cache—namely manga, anime, and video games. In a word, *contents* (as singular plural) designates the commodity value of a cultural good in a digital world. It is a term to which we will return throughout the rest of the book, particularly when seeing the rollout of i-mode. This chapter hence lays critical groundwork for subsequent analysis of its partner term, *platform*.

Chapter 2 shifts to “Platform Typology: From Hardware to Contents,” offering a synthetic and typological account of existing work on platforms within media discourse and media studies, both within the Anglophone context as well as in Japan. Modifying a typology proposed by Japanese management writers Negoro Tatsuyuki and Ajiro Satoshi, I suggest we group the variety of usages of the term *platform* into three main types: (1) product-technology platforms; (2) contents platforms; (3) transactional or mediation platforms.⁶¹ This chapter engages the first two types, highlighting the tension between the earlier hardware-centric use of the term and its subsequent metamorphosis whereupon it references social media sites like YouTube, Facebook, or Twitter. For the hardware-centered use of the term I will examine definitions by venture capitalists such as Marc Andreessen and, with a similar attention to the computational, within Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort’s Platform Studies MIT Press book series. Within the product-technology platform I will also note its use within the automobile industry, where the platform refers to a common chassis used among various car models. The latter is important not only for expanding beyond the computational but also for understanding the genealogy of platform-related theorization in Japan and in the United States, where this

automobile-related definition gained particular traction. As it turns out, automobile manufacture is the heartland of platform research and theory; one strand of platform theory emerges out of an attempt by scholars affiliated with MIT's International Motor Vehicle Program to capture the specificity of Toyotist models of car manufacture. Contents platforms, in turn, designates a stream of objects that we know as social media sites or apps, things like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, which have given the term *platform* new meaning and have arguably eclipsed the computational usage in general. Ultimately, however, I will suggest that we need to look to a separate body of work to access the broader sense in which platform is used today, particularly within the media industries: management literature.

Chapter 3, "Transactional Platform Theory: A Japanese Genesis," undertakes an intervention in media studies accounts of the platform by turning to Japanese management literature and American and European work on multisided markets, both of which flesh out a theory of the platform as a mediatory or intermediate function between markets or between third parties. Credit cards, auction sites, and third-party automobile parts suppliers all become examples of this alternate definition of the platform, one that arguably has the greatest influence on industry leaders' invocation of the term today. Further, I demonstrate in this chapter that this literature gets its start in Japanese managerial discourse in 1994, before moving to France and the United States in literature on multisided markets around the year 2000. This chapter explains the importance of both bodies of work and suggests that the early development of this theory in the Japanese managerial context impacted the implementation of the i-mode project in the late 1990s. The chapter further examines how mediation platforms undergird an expansion of management practices into all aspects of digital life—from the mobilization of users for the generation of contents to the management of uses under digital rights management (DRM). By being the mediator or the "middle," the platform operator asserts power over all entities it mediates—whether these are other companies, users, the economy, or society. This chapter hence uncovers a logic of "mediation management" that binds all platforms today.

Chapter 4, "Docomo's i-mode: Formatting the Mobile Internet," shifts our focus from platform theory and its development of mediation management

to platform-building practice, offering an account of the development of the world's first successful rollout of the mobile internet. It examines the key players in the i-mode project, as well as its conceptualization as a transaction platform that would, in turn, become the basis for other businesses (and is a hybrid of all three types of platforms studied in earlier chapters). Of particular interest is the crucial relationship between platform provider (Docomo) and contents providers (those companies that provided services or data products to consumers, from airline reservation booking sites, to banking, to wallpaper downloads and gaming). Through this structure, Docomo created one of the first successful *paid-content*s service environment for the mobile internet, leading many of its contents providers to launch initial public offerings (IPOs) and go public, and ultimately having a great impact on the eventual implementation of platform capitalist enterprises. The resulting “contents bubble”—a moment when low-value contents could be sold at high prices, and wherein the stock market valuation of the contents producers was similarly inflated—reinforced the already entrenched term, leading to an increased sense that there was money to be made in contents in a virtuous circle that propped up all business parties involved. The history of i-mode as the project that formatted the mobile internet experience in Japan and served as a model for both Apple's iPhone and Google's Android is one that needs to be recalled as we have shifted from a web-based experience of the internet to an app-based internet experience that is very much dependent on the paid, commercial model of the internet that i-mode pioneered. (Indeed, the very term *app* likely derives from i-mode's earlier shortening of “application” to “appli.”)

Chapter 5, “Platforms after i-mode: Dwango's Niconico Video,” returns to the Kadokawa–Dwango merger, which I touched on above and whose present activities are in large part indebted to the i-mode experience. This chapter presents a wider examination of the evolution of contents providers into platforms builders in their own right, seeing this occurrence as part of a wider *i-mode effect*. Here we move from the story of i-mode to the manner in which i-mode functioned as a basin for activity on or around it, including being the birthing ground for some of the major social media applications that sprung from its platform. DeNA, GREE, and Dwango are the three most renowned of these. DeNA was founded by

one of the McKinsey & Company consultants who worked on the i-mode project (foregrounding the role of global knowledge purveyors in fostering i-mode itself), and later founded an auction site and a social gaming site. While GREE has declined in importance, DeNA and its subsidiary Cygames remain some of the most important social gaming publishers in Japan today. Subsequently, the chapter turns to examine arguments made about the specificity of platforms in Japan, paying particular attention to Dwango's Niconico Video, Japan's premier video-sharing service. Through an analysis of the unique interface of the Niconico streaming platform, this chapter suggests that one of the characteristics of many Japanese platforms is that they both combine the intermediary, hosting function of the platform as well as create or mediate the contents produced. There is a convergence between contents and platforms that marks Japanese contents in particular. Examining theories of the interface and comments culture within digital media studies, this chapter examines the intertwining of contents and platforms in Japan, and concludes with a consideration of the concept of platform capitalism itself.

The conclusion, "The Platformization of Regional Chat Apps," examines the continuing and unfolding of the i-mode effect as platform model, this time in the context of East Asian chat apps first released between 2009 and 2011: Korea's KakaoTalk, Korea/Japan's LINE, and China's WeChat. We increasingly read about the platformization of chat apps with articles focusing on Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. Yet these Asian chat apps were the pioneers of this transformation of the humble chat app into a metaplatfrom that offers all the functionality of the smartphone within the app itself—from calling and texting, to sending money, making payments, reading news, and ordering cabs. This chapter examines these apps both in light of the legacy of the i-mode platform—framing them as reboots of the i-mode concept within a chat app environment—and through the lens of a modified conception of media regionalism. That these are apps distributed on iOS or Android also marks a transformative shift in the circulation and pervasiveness of the platform concept—from i-mode to iOS/Android.

To any who have asked about the meaning of the keywords examined here—*platform* and *contents*—this book seeks to provide an account that

ranges across the very heterogeneous sites of these terms' impact, and narrates at least one version of the emergence of the platform economy. It is an answer that avoids the geographical bias of the habitually Silicon Valley-centric writings on the platform (whether critical or celebratory), and the presentism of these writings. It charts the emergence of the term as platform theory, and the practice of building platforms in the Japanese context, offering a historical trajectory of the rise of the platform economy and a critical assessment of its impacts on the management of contemporary life. History—even near history like narrated in this book—provides us with perspective on the world, enabling an informed critique of the current era of platform domination, and a clearer sense of how it is we got here. Displacing network, platform is the new communicative and managerial logic of our time; it is also the dominant commercial logic of the internet. The Japanese platform story is a key moment in how we got to this point, how we acquired the habit of paying for contents on the internet, and how the management of things and words, contents and people, by mediation platforms, developed. It also thereby offers a unique vantage point from which to grasp our platform present. The platform as mediatory device or mechanism rewrites prior relations between companies and consumers, such that economy and society are now governed by platformic relations, which is to say: defined by the management of social, economic, and cultural relations by means of platform mediation. As such, the focus of *The Platform Economy* is less on particular platform entities and more on the managerial logics embedded in particular platform entities (like i-mode), which in turn extend beyond them through their discursive and medial effects. These logics increasingly penetrate a social field now reformatted as the platform society, and animate linguistic and industrial organizations reformatted as the platform economy. This expansionary logic of the platform and its management of companies, workers, products, users, and everything in-between is the true object of this book, and is the referent of that still ambiguous term, *platform capitalism*.