An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of Digital Platforms

Ted Saarikko

Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektor vid Umeå universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt försvar i MA121, MIT-huset, Onsdagen den 7 december, kl. 13:00. Avhandlingen kommer att försvaras på engelska.

Abstract
While the shape and nature of platforms varies across different instances, they pursue common ambitions such as reduction of risk, complexity, or transaction costs. Although initially theorised in industrial contexts, subsequent theorising regarding platform development, platform ecosystems, and platform strategy has drawn upon studies of high-tech industries in general and IT-based platforms in particular. While the inherent malleability of digitised data and digital technology offers possibilities, they also make it difficult to pin down the locus of a low-variety platform core. As such, one of the fundamental properties of digital platforms is rather mundane: to provide stability. With that in mind, this thesis pursues the following research question: How can a digital platform maintain stability for its stakeholders in the face of constant technical change? This thesis utilises affordance theory as a means to operationalise a relational view of digital platform, where stability is assessed in relation to stakeholders rather than technical persistence. This dissertation is based on an interpretive case study, primarily using qualitative data in the form of interviews gathered as part of two separate projects that varied both in scope and orientation. The thesis offers two main contributions. First, the idea of platform stability as derived from low-variety components that are persistent over time is difficult to apply in relation to digital platforms. Rather, we need to approach stability as a composite property, based on the ability of the platform to satisfy technical-, informational-, and social expectations. Hence, stability should not be considered as a fixed or absolute property, but rather a moving target. Second, this thesis suggests that the existing notion of (technical) coring needs to be complemented with information coring and social coring when applied to digital platforms. The proposed concept of information coring expresses the ability to hide complexity and present bottom-line results to the user in a comprehensible manner. Social coring refers to the idea of aligning technical integration and social integration in a platform. A relational perspective applied to digital platforms offers a possible avenue for theorising digital platforms as information systems artefacts rather than the dichotomous relationship between platform-as-architecture and platform-as-marketplace found in extant literature.