Mediatised marketplaces: Platforms, places, and strategies for trading material goods in digital economies

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Abstract
Digital marketplaces are standard and pervasive sites to trade and exchange material consumer goods worldwide. Yet the media characteristics of different, situated marketplaces have received relatively sporadic attention from the field of media and communication studies, despite the otherwise prominent disciplinary interest in digital technologies, platforms and processes of mediatisation. This paper coalesces perspectives from social, geography and retail studies with mediatisation approaches to extend a theorisation of digital marketplaces as ‘mediatised marketplaces’, focusing on the discussion of interactions between digital media and place involved in the distribution of material goods. We use illustrative examples of two different local marketplaces – the Swedish Tradera and Facebook Marketplace – to demonstrate how mediatised marketplaces challenge a range of distinctions, including between offline and online, material and immaterial, local and global. Mediatised marketplaces such as Tradera and Facebook Marketplace are grounded in place and local market identities, even as they operate on or are owned by global platforms; they rely on communicative as much as logistical functionalities of media; and are transformative of media and consumption practices. The paper contributes to studies of mediatisation and its impacts.

Keywords
Digital marketplace, digital media, material goods, place, consumption, shopping, exchange, distribution, trade

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Introduction

‘How does one “think” a marketplace?’ ask Stallybrass and White (1986) in their illuminating historical account on markets and fairs at the dawn of capitalism, and suggest:

At once a bounded enclosure and a site of open commerce, [a marketplace] is both the imagined centre of an urban community and its structural interconnections with the network of goods, commodities, markets, sites of commerce and places of production that sustain it. A marketplace is the epitome of local identity (...) and the unsettling of that identity by the trade and traffic of goods from elsewhere (1986: 27).

Digital marketplaces are ascendants of the traditional marketplaces that Stallybrass and White describe and transformational of how today’s everyday consumption occurs. They have attracted much attention from scholars in marketing and consumer studies (Doherty and Ellis-Chadwick, 2010; Hagberg et al., 2016; Hagberg and Fuentes, 2018; Kotha and Basu, 2011; Luca, 2017). Media researchers, for their part, have offered critical insights about the coordinating, intermediary role of digital platforms in social and economic exchanges (see below; Lovink et al., 2015), and begun to address socio-technical and regulatory dynamics of specific digital marketplaces for selling and buying physical goods, for example, by the popular online classified Craigslist in the US (Lingel, 2020), letgo in Turkey (Özcan and Şimşek, 2022) or the Chinese online trading giant Alibaba (Zhang, 2020; Zhang and Chen, 2022). Our study adds to this media literature by considering how the ‘interconnections’ that Stallybrass and White (1986: 27) emphasise are being forged – asking how the distribution of material consumer goods, media and place converge in the cases of the Swedish Tradera and Facebook Marketplace.

We advance an argument about digital marketplaces as ‘mediatised marketplaces’ by exploring their increasingly mediatised characteristics, drawing on mediatisation research (Eskjær, 2013; Ekström et al., 2016; Krotz, 2017; Lunt and Livingstone, 2016), and theoretical debates about socio-spatial relations and transformations (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Jansson 2007, 2013). Following the mediatisation approach, we understand digital marketplaces such as eBay or Tradera, and social practices of trade and exchange they enable, as based on the integration of digital technologies, resources and infrastructures, to not only ‘act directly on the world of consumption’ but also to change those practices (Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 49; Eskjær, 2013). We also think through the concept of ‘geomedia’ that describes the mutual interaction between processes and technologies of mediatisation and the social and cultural construction of place and space (Fast et al., 2018). This helps us explain how those marketplaces function as social, economic and communicative spaces.

Our discussion is grounded through two illustrative examples of digital marketplaces – Tradera and Facebook Marketplace – both facilitating a local trade of material goods (rather than digital or immaterial goods), but representing a different origin, evolution and market presence. Tradera and Facebook Marketplace allow us to examine networked geographies anchored in place, culture and language, and to highlight productive differences and also changeability in the world of digital marketplaces. The paper responds to Langley and Leyshon’s call (2017: 13) to detail how new platform-mediated economic circulation ‘manifests itself in concrete terms for specific enterprises’. We contribute to discussions of how complex relations between local markets and global platforms and between the exchange of material goods and communication are being reconfigured in and through digital marketplaces.
Marketplaces: From physical to digital

The fundamental way in which networks shape global markets has been discussed in a large body of literature, which serves as a backdrop here. In the mid-1990s, Manuel Castells showed how information technology had made digital and mediated networks pervasive to the social structure of contemporary society (Castells, 1996: 469). Mediated networks, in Castells’ view, constitute power rather than merely mediate it, or as he phrases it: ‘the powers that are in the media networks take second place to the power of flows embodied in the structure and language of these networks’ (Castells, 1996: 476). While writing extensively about markets, Castells primarily addressed markets as a metaphor for large-scale aggregated human interaction, focusing on structural transformations such as digitisation of the financial market, global fragmentation of industrial production and the globalisation of the labour market. More recently, Christian Fuchs has written abundantly about the social consequences of digitised markets from a similar perspective, approaching markets on a macro level, as a totality of transactions between abstract actors. Markets here become what Fuchs, referring to Lefebvre, calls a ‘representational space’: ‘Representational spaces are systems of signs, totalities of representations. They operate at the level of society’s subsystems and interact with other subsystems at the level of society as totality’ (Fuchs, 2020: 263).

While insightful in the theorisation of digitised markets as spaces that constitute pervasive and global social structures, the work of sociologists like Castells and Fuchs differs from how we approach ‘marketplaces’. We frame ‘marketplaces’ as specific, concrete places of exchange of material goods between consumers/shoppers, which are nevertheless, like everything else, embedded in global flows and structures.

To theorise how digital marketplaces function as specific, concrete places for buying and selling physical goods, we draw on a rich platform scholarship that recognises digital platforms as ‘digital infrastructures’ enabling interaction between ‘different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers and even physical objects’ (Srnicek, 2017: 43). Platform studies by scholars such as Srnicek (2017) provide a bird’s view analysis of ‘platform capitalism’, offering critical observations about the exponential rise of platforms and their wide-ranging implications for businesses and social life (‘since they can operate anywhere, whenever digital interaction takes place’), the role of ‘network effects’, cross-subsidisation and the owner-imposed rules digital platforms are bound by (Barns 2019; Srnicek, 2017: 44-47). In a similar vein, the work by Langley and Leyshon (2017: 11) defines ‘the platform’ as a ‘socio-technical intermediary and business arrangement that is incorporated into wider processes of capitalisation’.

Because of the emphasis on the specific material and spatial dimensions of digital marketplaces, our approach aligns also with work on modern logistics. Scholars like John Durham Peters (2015) and Ned Rossiter (2016) have contributed to a theoretical understanding of how modern logistics are fundamentally reliant on media technologies, from the radar of the 20th century to contemporary positioning systems, aiming to ‘organise and orient, to arrange people and property, often into grids’ (Peters in Rossiter 2016: 5). Such theories of media logistics share some similarities with the ‘geomedia’ literature, which we rely on more closely in this article as it captures well the mutually co-constitutive spatial and mediated characteristics of the digital marketplaces we study.

Digital marketplaces and geography

Much literature in cultural studies, sociology and human geography emphasises the confluence of spatial and social components defining marketplaces over time, and includes analyses of varied sites where people come together to exchange and trade goods as manifestations of sociality, culture and
economic rationality (Crewe 2003; Wringley and Lowe, 1996; see Podkalicka, 2022 for further relevant literature). Writing in the early 1990s, sociologist Rob Shields observed, for example, that retail practice in modern shopping malls

returns us to the historic importance of the market-place as a meeting-place, a site of communication and social exchange which often transcends the limits of propinquitous community (1992: 102).

Since the early 2000s, digital marketplaces have transformed from new and marginal business innovations to the dominant mode of consumption. Consequently, numerous consumer studies have focused on empirical aspects of digital marketplaces, developing typologies that distinguish between different organisational structures, sorts of goods and consumer experiences that digital marketplaces offer (Armstrong Soule and Hanson 2018; Perren and Kozinets, 2018; Saarijärvi et al., 2018; Yrjölä et al., 2017). A matrix of ‘domains of circulation and types of platforms’ for different products, content, work, etc. has been also proposed by geographers Langley and Leyshon (2017: 16). Usefully for framing our examples, Langley and Leyshon recognise ‘online exchange markets’ for ‘sale of products and services through physical distribution’, serviced by ‘multi-sided’ platforms such as eBay, Alibaba, Craigslist, and also ‘social media and user-generated content’ as ‘prominent domains of the new form of digital economic circulation’ (2017: 16).

In Rebeca Perren and Robert V. Kozinets’ terminology, digitally-mediated markets are labelled ‘lateral exchange markets’ (LEMs) and characterised by coordinating affordances of digital technologies, ‘equivalent’ participant relations, and the coupling of ‘the social and economic’ (2018: 34). Similar observations about interlinking social, cultural and economic values have been made by Saarijärvi et al. (2018) and Armstrong Soule and Hanson (2018) in business studies; and Bohlin (2011) in media studies. Consumer and platform research is important here because it draws attention to the centrality of digital technologies and platforms for ‘platform intermediation’, and social and communicative interactions (albeit in different styles and degrees) within those markets (Perren and Kozinets, 2018: 23). The digital marketplaces we focus on figure as such intermediary, networked infrastructures ‘connecting’ and ‘enabling’ direct consumer-to-consumer exchanges of material goods (Langley and Leyshon, 2017; Perren and Kozinets, 2018: 26).

Existing analyses of digital marketplaces regard geography as an important criterion. Writing in 2003, when digital marketplaces were considered ‘disruptive’ rather than the routinely visited sites they are today, geographer Louise Crewe took an issue with the ‘abstractions’ that circulated about e-commerce at the time (2003: 358) and the application of ‘the totalising spatial metaphors’, advocating instead the understanding of shopping as ‘complex’ and ‘variable’ place-bound practices (2003: 354). More recently, media scholars McGuigan and Manzerolle (2015: 1830) have criticised the positioning of digital commerce (advanced by some business and marketing writing) as increasingly ‘inevitable’, ‘unbounded’, ‘seamless’, and occurring in ‘omnipresent marketplace’. Drawing on Harold Innis’ work, and against the historical background of information and communication technologies long servicing global commerce, McGuigan and Manzerolle (2015: 1833) re-emphasise the materiality and embeddedness of media and markets in space, articulating the significance of ‘tradition, geography and cultural contingency’, infrastructures, transportation, regional/local policies and regulations. After Innis, their approach insists on ‘the logistical interconnection between “routes of culture” and “routes of trade”’ (McGuigan and Manzerolle, 2015: 1833).

In general terms, Langley and Leyshon highlight the importance of the platform intermediation for a geographically separated but ‘connected and interactive’ circulation of ideas, services and goods (2017: 11 – emphasis ours), while several studies on specific digital marketplaces underscore
geography and spatial aspects in a variety of ways. Armstrong Soule and Hanson (2018: 263), for example, note that marketplaces such as Facebook Marketplace, Craigslist and Buy/Sell/Trade groups are ‘geographically bound’ in terms of the communities they attract; Saarijärvi et al.’s (2018) research stresses Facebook groups’ local orientation; while Podkalicka (2022) describes local, purposefully promoted, characteristics of Gumtree (Australia). Consumer studies have further considered geography in relation to the uptake of online shopping and digital marketplaces across various locations, based on context-specific socio-economic variables (Beckers et al., 2018 in Belgium; or Effah, 2014 in Ghana; Yang and Wang, 2013 in China). Many studies have confirmed the so-called ‘home bias’ – that online shoppers still have a preference for buying things closer to home – as well as the important role that language and cultural traditions play in online consumer practices (Cowgill et al., 2013; Gomez-Herrera et al. 2014; Yang and Wang, 2013; Zhao et al., 2019).

Literature on prominent Chinese digital marketplaces (Shen and He, 2022; Zhang, 2020) has been useful in noting region-oriented expansion strategies by major digital platforms such as Alibaba in Asia-Pacific, including via local business connections and around the Chinese language (Keane and Yu, 2019), and more broadly, the value of geographically and historically informed approaches that recognise digital platforms’ uneven, context-specific and contingent growth, whereby studies of how platforms develop should be grounded in ‘the geographic region as a dynamic space wherein the platforms encounter and interact with local, subnational, national and transnational forces’ (Zhang and Chen, 2022: 1455).

Mediatisation and ‘sociospatial transformations’ of shopping

Our main theoretical inspiration for examining digital marketplaces as mediatised marketplaces comes from theoretical discussions of mediatisation, signifying the extent to which ‘social processes (...) become inseparable from and dependent on technological processes and resources of mediation’ (Jansson 2013: 281) – and specifically the idea that ‘mediatisation’ be understood ‘in terms of sociospatial transformation’ (Jansson 2013: 280). Back in 2006, André Jansson and Jesper Falkheimer argued that a ‘spatial turn’ in media studies was underway. Over the years, a growing range of research has in different ways paid attention to ‘how communication produces space and how space produces communication’ (cited in Fast et al., 2018: 23). Stig Hjarvard argues that:

The prime characteristic of the process of mediatisation (...), as conceived of here, is rather an expansion of the opportunities for interaction in virtual spaces and a differentiation of what people perceive to be real. By the same token, distinctions like that between global and local become much more differentiated as the media expand our contact with events and phenomena in what were once ‘faraway places’ (2008: 111 – emphasis in original).

Crucially, Jansson understands mediatisation as ‘socio-spatial concept’ (2013: 281). Influenced by Lefebvre’s work, he refers to the integrated material and infrastructural, representational and cultural ‘dimensions’ of media, and emphasises their changing – and constitutive and transformative – workings on the production of social space. One of the identified consequences of mediatisation is social and spatial ‘flexibility’ realised through the pursuit of ‘activities and relations at a distance’ with the possibility of maintaining ‘strong bonds with our everyday environments’; another one is the enhancement of ‘dependencies’ between the different dimensions (or ‘socio-spatial regimes’) of the media (Jansson 2013: 289). Jansson calls on scholars to investigate the changing ‘sociospatial arrangements’ (not just media) and ‘the complex forms of dependencies
generated in times and spaces’ by a plurality of interlinked media practices or, in his terminology, ‘transmedia textures’ (2013: 281; see also Ekström et al., 2016).

Ideas about the transformation or re-configuration of space (social, geographical, cultural) as a result of mediatisation have been advanced by Couldry and Hepp (2017). The intensification of ‘reciprocal and continuous communications-at-a-distance’ (Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 82), they argue, influences social interactions and practices – and their varied impacts, including in ‘the world of consumption’ (Ibid: 49). While transformations in shopping aren’t a central concern in Couldry and Hepp’s account, the theoretical attention is helpfully drawn to communicative (and material) relations that ‘deeply embedded’ media and digital technologies produce and sustain across space and time. Empirically, Joseph Turow has studied, for example, how physical retail spaces integrate media content and digital technologies, including store apps and tracking systems, as part of broader shifts in retail (2014, 2017).

This interest in the interaction between media and space, and media studies and geography, has been further explored within the subfield of geomedia studies. Fast et al. (2018: 4) describe how the geomedia perspective addresses ‘both mediated representations of space/place and the “logistical” properties of media’ which organise and mediate relations between people and objects in time and space. While the former definition refers to conventional forms of media representations, the ‘logistical’ definition of media becomes more elusive as it includes less obvious forms of media such as ‘pervasive cultural techniques like clocks and calendars’ (Fornäs, 2016; Fast et al., 2018: 4), as well as – we would argue – mediatised marketplaces.

Mikkel Eskjær (2013) applied the ideas of mediatisation to a study of an online eco store in Denmark and argued that ‘modern ethical consumption is not only reliant but also, to a certain extent a product of mediatisation’ (2013: 27 – emphasis in original). Media technologies, as Eskjær puts it, ‘offer new means of purchasing goods and services, which are no longer limited to a specific geographic location or to designated hours of the day’ (Eskjær, 2013: 32). Internet stores are posited as an ‘extension’ or ‘a sort of second order’ of traditional, locally based but stocked with international goods shops, further undergirded and impacted by ‘digital algorithms’ (Eskjær, 2013: 33). Another key point we build on recognises online shopping as indicative of how the ‘mediatisation of consumption’ occurs through integrating the informational, communicative (e.g., online/global distribution of marketing or product-related messages) and material affordances of media (‘tools’) for selling and buying material goods (Eskjær, 2013: 35–43).

**Local digital marketplaces: Facebook groups and Facebook marketplace**

How marketplaces are mediatised, as an outcome of complex, ‘holistic’ socio-spatial and technological processes that prompt transformations (Jansson, 2013: 283), can be illustrated by two contemporary examples. The first illustrative example is the creation and everyday ‘ritualisation’ (Jansson, 2013: 283), or ‘amalgamation’ Eskjær (2013: 54), of local groups for trade on Facebook and the platform’s subsequent introduction of the service Facebook Marketplace. The other is a national (if mostly locally focused) online marketplace called Tradera operating in Sweden. Similar marketplaces to Tradera include, for instance, Gumtree, available in a few countries including the UK and Australia. Both our examples can be described as local, although the local, as we explain, takes on different meaning and scale.

*Facebook Marketplace* is a function on the Facebook App that allows users to buy and sell goods locally. The function was launched in the US and Australia in 2016 and extended to a number of European countries in 2018, with the stated goal of competing with *eBay*
People had, however, been using Facebook for the purpose of exchange and commerce for many years prior, relying on its existing functions to create closed groups where users could connect with people in their local communities to sell, swap or give away things they no longer needed. The introduction of Facebook Marketplace was thus a way to cater to and benefit from existing user practices; and it was not long before Facebook decided to sell ads in the Marketplace (Barns, 2019; Chowdhry, 2018). In May 2020, when Facebook launched its Facebook Shops service for small businesses, it evoked this genealogy:

For years, people have used our apps to buy and sell things from the early days of posting a photo of a bicycle with the caption “for sale,” to selling your coffee table on Marketplace and now shopping styles from your favourite brands and influencers on Instagram. It was the people who use our apps who envisioned social commerce. We’re helping them make it a reality (Meta, 2020).

Here, Facebook’s gradual move into the sector of e-commerce is framed as a natural extension of well-established patterns of social and commercial interactions that have evolved spontaneously among its users.

In our discussion of mediatised marketplaces, Facebook is an interesting example for many reasons. Firstly, because it is a communications and social media platform that has come to be used as a site for exchange of material goods, thereby highlighting the porous borders between media used for communicative and social purposes, and the transactional aspects of marketplaces (Armstrong Soule and Hanson, 2018; Barns, 2019; Chen et al., 2016; Perren and Kozinets, 2018; Saarijärvi et al., 2018). Secondly, because it uses one of the most international social media platforms to carve out spatially situated and delineated local communities of consumers, thereby demonstrating the porous distinctions between the local and the global. And, thirdly, because the emergence of marketplaces on Facebook began as spontaneous practices among self-organised user groups that were eventually commercialised by Facebook, thus revealing the porosity between informal user practices and corporate strategies.

**Localised marketplaces by global classified groups**

The second illustrative example concerns the ownership and management of national marketplaces by global classified groups such as eBay or Adevinta. eBay, for example, is known as a huge international corporation operating under its own well-recognised brand, allowing consumers in different parts of the world to trade on a common platform. Until 2021, when eBay Classified Group was acquired by another global online classified group called Adevinta, eBay ran national marketplaces – termed also ‘online classifieds’ – in several countries around the world. These included, for example, Gumtree Australia and Gumtree UK, which originated in the UK in 2000 and was acquired by eBay in 2005. Both are distinctly national digital marketplaces, originally for secondhand goods, and later expanding into services.

In parallel to growing its own global brand, eBay actively acquired smaller online platforms for particular types of goods, such as the car trading platform Motors.co.uk or national platforms such as Giosis’ Japan Business – both of which were bought by eBay in 2018 (Marketline, 2019). The eBay empire thus consisted of a conglomerate of one global platform for the exchange of goods of any kind, and a multitude of small to mid-sized, local marketplaces catering to different types of goods and regions. After the latest acquisition, the new owner, Adevinta, has however got rid of a number of those companies, such as Gumtree and Motors.co.uk, which were sold in late 2021 in order to comply with existing competition laws (Bowman, 2021).
One example of local marketplaces found in Sweden illustrates well those developments and dynamics. In Sweden, eBay initially began operating under its own brand name in 2005 but found it hard to establish itself on the Swedish market and swiftly changed business strategy. In 2006 eBay acquired the Swedish site for classified ads, Tradera. The term ‘Tradera’ literally translates as a traditional Swedish word for ‘telling a story’, although most Swedish customers would rather associate it with the English word ‘to trade’. Tradera is a well-established platform that has been around since 1999 when it was founded by the auction company Kaplan Auktioner (Storwall, 2006). By 2006 Tradera was one of Sweden’s two largest online marketplaces for secondhand goods, next to Blocket, which was acquired by the Norwegian media corporation Schibsted in 2007. By the time it was bought by eBay, Tradera did not only represent a strong brand name but could also, as one of the board members pointed out, offer its new owner a database of 1.3 million users (in a country of 10 million) and a ‘very strong community’ (Östlund, 2006). When faced with the difficulties of gaining access to Swedish consumers from the outside, eBay thus found a backdoor into the Swedish market by buying this already existing community. When eBay was divided in 2015 and Paypal was spun off as a separate corporation, Paypal took over Tradera since it wanted a marketplace where it could test new technologies for payment (Lindmark, 2015).

Between 2006 and 2015 eBay and eBay-owned Tradera existed as separate brands and platforms on the international and the Swedish markets. Tradera’s Swedish CEO at the time argued that the two platforms would complement each other: eBay would focus on the global and Tradera the local market (Storwall, 2006). Economically the two companies were integrated, but the only outward sign that Tradera was part of eBay was a small eBay logo on the Tradera website (Storwall, 2006); the public interfaces for engagement with and between users were kept separate as distinctive marketplaces. This meant that the Tradera user could access a national market for material goods and interact with other users in their own national language, under the familiar brand name, while the eBay user could access international markets delineated and serviced by eBay.

In December 2021, Tradera would however leave the Paypal family when the CEO and the company’s senior management bought Tradera from Paypal, once again placing it under Swedish ownership by the newly formed holding company TraSwe Holding. Arguing that Tradera had always been somewhat of an ‘odd bird’ in the Paypal group, they decided to go independent as a Swedish company with the goal of expanding internationally (Johansson, 2021; Leijonhufvud, 2021).

Amazon’s problems of expanding in Sweden tell a similar story of the challenges of establishing foreign platforms in a national context. When Amazon announced its intentions to launch its services on the Swedish market in the fall of 2020, many were concerned that the international giant would destabilise the Swedish consumer market. All such fears and hopes were put to shame as Amazon two years later still had a very limited share of the Swedish market for online consumer goods (Ny Teknik, 2022; Wickman, 2021).

The case of eBay’s construction of marketplaces both nationally and internationally, as well as the subsequent re-nationalisation of marketplaces like Tradera, indicates that there might be commercial benefits to strategically creating and maintaining different markets. Active users can also profit from the price differences between national and international markets by buying goods on one platform and selling at a higher price on another platform. In those cases, the traders and the platforms benefit from the absence of trade barriers such as tolls and tariffs within the EU, but they also benefit from the lack of a common platform that would level out regional price differences within that market.
Mediatised marketplaces: Communicative, material and spatial dimensions

Digital marketplaces are mediatised in three interrelated ways: the first way is the extensive use of communication tools in already existing marketplaces; the second is the extension of already existing social media platforms into the sphere of exchange and retailing; the third is situating marketplaces spatially, leveraging local and global networks of communication and material exchange.

These dimensions of mediatisation connect with the observations by Shields in his early work on *Cultures of Internet*, namely that: ‘the Internet creates a crisis of boundaries between the real and the virtual, between time zones and between spaces, near and distant’ (1996:7 – emphasis in original); and that it is essential to treat telecommunications and computer-mediated communications networks as local phenomena, as well as global networks. Embedded within locally specific routines of daily schedules and the ‘place-ballets’ of individuals, Internet has been shaped by its users (Shields, 1996:3 – emphases in original).

They are consistent with Hagberg, Sundstrom and Egels-Zandén’s remarks about an ‘increased blurring of boundaries’ or ‘an emerging hybridity’ between different roles, aspects and contexts in contemporary – digitised – shopping, which challenges ‘online/offline, digital/analogue, and material/virtual’ distinctions (2016: 705).

For the communicative dimension, as our examples demonstrate, mediatised marketplaces rely on communication practices between participants of the exchange. The acts of communication as well as economic transactions – the familiar characteristics of traditional marketplaces – are increasingly facilitated and structured by companies such as Facebook or Amazon through digital media platforms with an expanding range of functionalities and uses impacting everyday experiences of buying and selling. As Barns (2019:1) put it: ‘global platforms have evolved from spaces of connection and socialisation to become major infrastructures upon which much of modern life depends’. Facebook started as a communicative social media platform but has now moved into consumer-to-consumer markets, tapping into and commercialising already existing consumption practices such as routinised exchanges of used goods (Armstrong Soule and Hanson, 2018; Saarijärvi et al., 2018). Amazon, on the other hand, began as an online book trader and has now become one of the world’s largest digital media companies engaging in fields ranging from outright media production through to home automation Alexa (Galloway, 2017; Langley and Leyshon, 2017).

The seemingly contradictory trajectories of these two online giants – where Facebook has expanded from a platform for sharing information into the exchange of material goods while Amazon developed from a retailer of material goods into a major media platform – point to the porous borders between the circulation of material and immaterial goods. These developments, as argued by Eskjær, suggest that not only social and communicative interactions, but also that material ‘consumption is mediatised’ (2013: 35). The expanding integration between – and transformation of – marketplaces (for goods, trade and consumption) and digital media platforms emphasises the importance of a mediatisation perspective to understand not only conventional media but also the increasingly mediatised distribution of material goods.

The spatial organisation is an equally important part in the mediatisation of marketplaces. The focus on the distribution of material goods attaches mediatised marketplaces to a context, which
speaks to the importance of geography and scholarly insights about placed-based, everyday identities of retail (McGuigan and Manzerolle, 2015; Shields, 1992, 1996), as well as the value of a geomedia framework outlined above.

Social media platforms like Facebook can be said to demonstrate both the representational and logistical aspects of geomedia as they incorporate representations of places and provide a communicative infrastructure that connects people across space, allowing them also to trade. Digital marketplaces are, in some regards, clear-cut examples of a ‘logistical’ media that ‘arranges people and property into time and space’ (Fast et al., 2018: 4); they not only connect people from different places in a communicative and social sense, they enable the distribution of material goods across space in a logistical, point a to b, sense (Leyshon et al., 2005; Langley and Leyshon, 2017).

While Eskjær (2013: 43) noted the ‘magic’ of online shopping, whereby material goods get delivered in a ‘seemingly immaterial universe’, it is important to acknowledge that connecting people and goods across space does not make materiality or place redundant – not least given the use of devices or transport, and relevance of embodied consumption practices (Hagberg et al., 2016: 704; McGuigan and Manzerolle 2015: 1845). Markets are often spatially located and express shared geographies. For example, the national markets in non-English speaking countries constitute language communities, and they can be organised into local (or hyperlocal) places, sections and demographics, such as local Facebook groups.

As with traditional physical marketplaces, digital marketplaces can be localised in surprising ways. Large corporate players such as eBay but also individuals, not-for-profits and community groups can use a local language or tap into locally meaningful representations and traditions to organise a shared space for buying and selling goods – a marketplace. The value of the local is mobilised at different spatial levels and scales. The example of Tradera demonstrates how the value of the local, here referring to national, has been appropriated by the global platform without being holistically incorporated or dissolved. With the acquisition of Tradera by eBay in 2006, local and national features of the original platform – as well as the Swedish language and the national borders within which it operates – were strategically maintained to benefit from the already existing community of consumers that Tradera offered. The 2021 take-over of Tradera by a Swedish company signals local characteristics too, despite its declared future-oriented, international outlook.

Our examples demonstrate that the ‘socio-spatial’ importance of the marketplace persists, albeit in new and varied forms and configurations. Many social and consumer-to-consumer interactions continue to derive their meanings from a place, as digital marketplaces provide an option for the users to form and maintain a relationship not only to each other within a local situated place – as evident in many trading Facebook groups based in ‘a city, region, or nation’ (Armstrong Soule and Hanson, 2018: 266) – but also where consumers can actively interact and form connections globally, based on a shared interest in the specific goods rather than a shared locality. ‘Branded Buy/Sell/Trade’ Facebook groups provide one example of such interest-based communities of shoppers (Armstrong Soule and Hanson, 2018).

Media users can rely on global corporate platforms for their own localised consumption practices. Our examples add to the studies identifying the value of ‘localness’ in digital marketplaces (Podkalicka, 2022; Saarijärvi et al., 2018: 1102; Yang and Wang, 2013), demonstrating how local (sometimes grassroots) initiatives can develop within large international, commercial platforms and exploit those platforms to build their own communities, developed and shaped locally, not only for communication and sociality but for logistics-based exchange and trade of material goods.

This does not, however, imply a re-empowering of the local. Castells reflected on how older conceptions of place and space are destabilised in the network society where ‘dominant functions
are organised in networks pertaining to a space of flows that links them up around the world, while fragmenting subordinate functions, and people, in the multiple space of places, made of locales increasingly segregated and disconnected from each other’ (Castells, 1996: 476). Local markets can thus be seen as subordinated to global digital platforms – whether these platforms originate in the West, or ‘Digital China’ (Keane and Yu, 2019: 4627). While local features may be present, in functions like Facebook Marketplace, local marketplaces are subsumed in global digital networks where they constitute sources of value and information in international platforms.

The relationship between local and global is evolving. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen the consolidation of online shopping, and the strengthened dominance of Amazon globally (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese, 2020), adding to the groundswell of unease with Amazon’s position, captured in titles such as ‘Baby Amazons take on their American role model: They are not as impotent as it might seem’ (The Economist, 2019) or ‘How to avoid Amazon: the definitive guide to online shopping without the retail titan’ (Osborne and Noor, 2020). The latter, published in The Guardian, puts forward:

while the site [Amazon] offers everything you could need at the moment, from food to films, via fish tanks and photo frames, there are many who feel uncomfortable about adding to its dominance. Concerns about its treatment of workers, how little tax it pays and its impact on smaller retailers are not new, but this crisis has shone the spotlight on them again (...) It is also worth remembering that however quick the delivery might be, it is not always as handy as being able to go to a shop and bring something home straight away. We will, one day, be back to that situation, so it is worth protecting your local retailers in the short term if you can. It is also worth looking for online alternatives (Osborne and Noor, 2020 – emphasis ours).

The authors mention specific examples of local online stores as alternatives to global digital marketplaces. This critique against Amazon (and other global players) corresponds to previous academic discussions about shopping malls and online commerce as a threat to retail traditions and vitality of city centres and town squares (e.g., Doherty and Ellis-Chadwick, 2010; Eskjaer, 2013), but with the difference that it acknowledges that online shopping can also be grounded in, and contribute to, a local community (Podkalicka, 2022). eBay’s decision to keep Tradera as a national platform, and Tradera’s return into Swedish ownership, alongside Amazon’s failure to make any significant impact on the Swedish market for online trade, might also imply that not only physical marketplaces but also online markets are seen as local communities by many consumers.

Importantly, the communicative, material and spatial dimensions intersect. The mediatisation of marketplaces for trade and exchange of material goods carves out virtual spaces that are connected to geographic places, which is reflective of Shields’ formulation about the ‘character’ of the internet as ‘a new network of virtual “sites” [that] is being superimposed on the world of place’ (1996: 1) – and underscores, further, digital platforms’ centrality in ‘rescript [ing] geographies of everyday socio-spatial encounter’ (Barns, 2019: 8). Mediatised marketplaces rely on digital technologies and platforms as much as on spatial strategies to create sites for the circulation of material goods. It is not that all shopping happens exclusively online but that interaction between individuals takes place, substantially, on and through digital platforms, which provide not only (and mostly) safe tools for communications but also for transactions and shopping. This catches an ever-shifting dynamic between user agency and platform dominance and control (Zuboff, 2019).

As transformative mediatised marketplaces are, so is the process of marketisation. According to Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge, ‘digital superstars’ such as Facebook, Amazon, and Google are not only dominant in terms of their market expansion (and consumer data processing) but ‘they
themselves are markets’ (2018: 2). The assertion that ‘we are always already in the marketplace’ is a corollary of understanding the ubiquity and consequences of digital markets (McGuigan and Manzerolle, 2015: 1845).

We have extended the understanding of digital marketplaces as ‘mediatised marketplaces’, building on mediatisation studies and Eskjær’s (2013) study into the Danish online ethical marketplace. Not only do digital marketplaces rely on digital technologies and platforms but they also change the media practices and environments they rely on and operate within. The argument about the relationship between media and marketplaces is akin to the one made by Hagberg, Sundstrom and Egels-Zandén about the ‘mutually reinforcing changes’ (2016: 707) in digitised retail contexts:

Digitalisation is not something that takes place “outside” of retailing and is then transferred to retailing (which the notions of “impact” and “effects” would wrongly suggest) but is an on-going transformation of retailing to be studied from “within” (2016: 696).

Like consumer research that advocates the appraisal of different forms and outcomes of ‘hybridisation’ in digital retail (Hagberg et al., 2016; Kervenoael et al., 2018), mediatisation approaches help unpack the complex restructuring of digital marketplaces, while paying attention to the specificity of the media, their historical context and empirical details related to transformations they bring about (Ekstrom et al. 2016; Jansson, 2013). The examples of Facebook groups and Facebook Marketplace, localised marketplaces owned by global groups (such as eBay or Adevinta) or by nationally-owned companies (in the case of Tradera) demonstrate how material consumption relates to and is reconfigured by digital media. A significant part of these transformations can be observed in the extent to which digital marketplaces defy the divisions between online and offline, material and immaterial, positioning shopping as a spatial practice that is locally situated yet shaped by global digital platforms. Those marketplaces are place-bound rather than ‘borderless’ (Crewe 2003; McGuigan and Manzerolle 2015: 1845).

Various efforts – from Facebook’s strategy to capitalise on local, originally user-generated, marketplaces, eBay’s strategy to acquire and build national online markets, through to TraSwe Holding AB’s purchase of Tradera – depend on a triangular relationship between consumption, mediatisation and place. A geomedia perspective can be a way to better understand this relationship as both a representation of space and a logistical tool for communication that enables social as well as commercial interaction. Approaching digital marketplaces as ‘mediatised’ helps appreciate how the circulation of material consumer goods creates a social space for consumption that can be, on the one hand, just as geographically located as the market square of the past, while, on the other, incorporated within global platforms, corporate conglomerates and changing networks of goods, finance and communication.

Conclusions

This article has focused on two specific digital marketplaces for the distribution of material goods. Our example of Tradera illustrates how digital marketplaces can benefit from locally and nationally produced and mediated communities of consumers; of Facebook marketplaces – how markets can be initiated through informal Facebook groups and later commercialised in the form of Facebook Marketplace and Shops. We have also mentioned Amazon and Facebook that are trading content and data, thus further blurring the boundaries between the kinds of products available for sale, data generation and the various markets they develop (Mayer-Schönberger and Ramge, 2018). Our analysis of the Tradera and Facebook Marketplace reinforces the arguments about the
embeddedness – rather than abstractions (Crewe, 2003) – of digital marketplaces for material goods, concurring with McGuigan and Manzerolle’s (2015: 1832) argument that rejects ‘the mythology of ubiquitous commercial connectivity [that] sanitises the materiality of media and markets’ in favour of recognising situated and differentiated structures and strategies. Such structures and strategies are nevertheless subject to the dominance of global digital platforms that sustain them in order to extract the values generated by local contexts.

Focusing on the ‘socio-spatial arrangements’ of digital marketplaces, we locate our work in the field of media and communication studies, but we have also drawn on work in geography, sociology, marketing and consumer studies for relevant cross-cutting insights. Synthesising the mediatisation approaches with the concept of geomedia and retail research, we have uncoupled the polarities between online/offline, immaterial/material and global/local, which exposes how the organisation of digital marketplaces is predicated on the intertwined exchange of information and material goods that is situated both in local communities and global platforms. In this regard, Stallybrass and White’s statement about the traditional marketplace of the past – as ‘[A]t once a bounded enclosure and a site of open commerce’ where the exchange of goods overlaps with the construction of identities (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 27) – resonates in digital economies. The included examples offer a snapshot of the complex interconnections between place, media – in the form of digital platforms, strategies and communication – and markets. This paper contributes to studies of mediatisation, and how social and spatial relations are inherent in the consumption of media and material goods.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Johan Fornäs for valuable feedback on an earlier version of the paper; as well as reviewers for their constructive comments.

Declaration of competing interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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