When Platforms Challenge Professions: A Clash Between Models of Professionalism Among Swiss Hoteliers?

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Abstract

The sociology of professions has begun to study how digital platforms impact the status and skills of professionals. Our article expands on this line of research by exploring how platforms challenge professions and how professionals react by advocating different types of professionalism. Based on a case study of hoteliers in Switzerland, we look at how the rise of online travel agencies (OTAs) has affected this professional group. Drawing on an analysis of data gathered through interviews with hoteliers (owners, managers, representatives of associations), our findings identify divergent responses to how platforms have undermined the jurisdiction built up by hoteliers. They highlight impacts on the capacity for self-regulation and customer service skills. The article contributes to the literature by showing that platforms foster divisions within occupational groups. Some members use platform tools because they fit their model of management-oriented professionalism. Others distance themselves from them, adopting a defensive professionalism.

Keywords

Digital platforms, digital transformation, hoteliers, professional jurisdiction, types of professionalism

Introduction

For more than a decade, digital platforms have been actively reshaping various business and professional sectors. In exploring the disruptive effects of the platform economy on capital and labor (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Srnicek, 2017; Vallas & Kovalainen, 2019), sociologists have focused on the employment conditions of individuals who find micro-work or offer services on platforms (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014; Collier et al., 2018). These studies show that platforms cause workforce casualization by promoting self-employment (Prassl, 2018). Much less attention has been paid to the platform economy's significant impact on professions and professional groups (Arcidiacono et al., 2023). And yet, as emerging technologies, platforms are likely to alter the tasks and expertise associated with a profession, if not substantially undermine the ability of professionals to maintain control over their work. Dolata (2019, p. 183) defines platforms as "digital, databased, and algorithmically structuring socio-technical infrastructures that exchange information, coordinate communication or organize work, offer a wide range of services, or distribute digital and non-digital products." Platforms such as Airbnb or Uber challenge what sociologists of professions broadly call "jurisdiction"—a monopoly on certain activities—by allowing nonprofessionals (flat owners, car drivers) to carry out tasks that had previously been reserved for certified professionals (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001). Platforms also introduce new rules that can reduce professional autonomy, which can be defined as the "capacity for self-management," i.e., the ability of professionals to organize and assess their own work and to make their own decisions (Blomqvist & Winblad, 2022, p. 66). By positioning themselves as intermediaries, platforms interfere in the material and symbolic relationships between professionals and clients, thereby challenging a key tenet of professional control (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001). Two main features of the platform economy have proven especially disruptive and serve to distinguish platforms from other technologies, such as AI (Meilvang, 2023). First, platforms alter the conditions of the professional-client relationship, mainly by charging commissions on transactions. Second, platforms give clients a certain capacity to assess professional abilities through algorithmically driven online customer reviews (Beuscart et al., 2016; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014).

Based on these characteristics and the sociology of professions framework, this article explores the complex relationship between the platform economy and professional groups to answer the following questions:

1.   Do platforms disrupt professional jurisdiction and autonomy? If so, how?
2.   How have the professionals concerned reacted?

We argue that some seek to defend their jurisdiction and autonomy by minimizing their interactions with platforms, whereas others see advantages to using these new technological devices in the context of their existing workflows. Our analysis draws on a study of hoteliers, who constitute an interesting case for two reasons. To begin with, platforms, especially online travel agencies (OTAs), have extensively changed the work of these professionals. Despite this fact, hoteliers have rarely been the subject of sociological research outside of tourism studies (Alrawadieh et al., 2021; Buhalis, 2000). In addition, hoteliers are a group that can be sociologically characterized as somewhere between a protected profession and an occupational group (Humair & Tissot, 2011). Therefore, its study allows us to examine how groups that are more or less regulated and protected by qualifications have different resources at their disposal to cope with platform disruptions (Christin, 2017, 2018).

Within this group, our study focused on hotel professionals who interact most directly with digital platforms, that is, those responsible for negotiating commissions, making marketing decisions, managing reservations, etc. Standing at the top of the professional hierarchy, they have the most to lose in terms of jurisdiction and autonomy. In smaller and family-run hotels, these individuals tend to own the establishment. In larger and chain hotels, they tend to be hired managers.

We draw on existing research in the sociology of professions to analyze how the emergence of digital platforms can challenge a professional group's traditional jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988, 2005). Furthermore, our research questions are in line with the major sociological debates on typologies of professionalism and shifts from one model to another. The changes introduced by platforms, that are new incumbents with organizational specificities, can be analyzed according to whether they foster a shift from a type of professionalism based on the defense of traditional jurisdiction to an organizational or hybrid model of professionalism (Muzio & Ackroyd, 2005). Our specific contribution to these debates is to consider which type of professionalism is conveyed by platforms as technological tools. Our article describes how hoteliers have been led to establish new connections with and through platforms, engaging with or keeping their distance from these new players that are redrawing jurisdictional boundaries. Ultimately, we theorize that different forms of professionalism may coexist within the same group, because of how new platform-based technologies divide members.

Theoretical perspectives on platforms and professions

Sociologists interested in the transformation of work have emphasized how digital platforms promote self-employment and task-based work as an alternative to wage-earning (Kenney & Zysman, 2019, Vallas & Kovalainen, 2019). Platforms cast themselves as neutral intermediaries that simply provide access to tasks or clients (Kirchner & Schüßler, 2019), but they use algorithms to control task execution (Rosenblat, 2019). Scholars consider that long-term con-

sequences will depend on the outcome of various ongoing legal disputes over platform regulation (Collier et al., 2018; Serafin, 2019) and the ability of workers to mobilize and circumvent the algorithmic control (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2022).

The sociology of the professions and professional groups can contribute to an in-depth understanding of these dynamics by studying the impact of platforms on different types of professional groups and professionalism. Vallas and Schor (2020) have proposed a useful distinction between "gig workers" who access work through platforms (rideshare drivers, microtaskers, etc.), "crowdworkers" who use platforms to work (tradespeople, artists, etc.), and "architects and designers" who design and maintain platforms. However, these authors remain curiously silent on the impact of platform work on higher-status professions in fields like law, medicine, and education.

Sociologists of professions have only just begun to study the impact of digital platforms on professional autonomy, expertise, and jurisdiction. In the medical field, Pfadenhauer and Kirschner (2017) have shown that the rise of appointment booking platforms has altered the doctor-patient relationship in a way that undermines professional autonomy. Thanks to digital tools, patients can assess healthcare providers based on availability (office hours, appointment delay) and attitude (consultation length, sympathetic guidance). Until now, these criteria involving interpersonal skills have not been considered, as the profession established its jurisdiction on medical knowledge (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001; Hughes, 1984). More generally, the spread of platforms, coupled with increased digitization and reliance on big data (Lester, 2020), has been found to curb a profession's ability to maintain its monopoly on specific skills and to socialize group members. In addition, key forms of specialized knowledge—such as the drafting of contracts or the review of case law by legal professionals (Flood & Robb, 2019)—can be rendered obsolete or made accessible to a wider audience (Rissanen et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the representatives and members of a given profession may develop strategies to maintain or defend their jurisdiction, strategies best described as manifestations of protective or defensive professionalism (Velthuis & van Doorn, 2020). For instance, professionals could develop their own digital platforms as an alternative to third-party technology (Dubois et al., 2019), claim a unique ability to analyze the associated data (Flood & Robb, 2019), or simply resist the pressure to change their established work practices. Christin (2017, 2018) has carried out an ethnographic comparison of the situation in web newsrooms and criminal courts, where platforms have been introduced to produce information or judicial acts and decisions. She found that "many algorithms are either ignored or actively resisted" by journalists and judges, thereby highlighting the "disconnect" between the modernizing discourse adopted by managers and the professional practices of employees.

Pursuing a similar line of research, our paper explores how platforms disrupt professional jurisdiction and autonomy. It relies on key concepts used in the sociology of professions to describe the jurisdictional challenges faced by all professional groups, especially more prestigious professions that have traditionally built up a significant degree of self-regulation. Over

the last two decades, the classic professional model—based on the ideals of jurisdictional control (Abbott, 1988), peer governance, and official recognition (Saks & Adams, 2019)—has given way to a "hybrid model" (Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2007). The latter is characterized by the integration of professions and professionals into bureaucratic or market structures, and is shaped by technological and economic pressures and new performance evaluation criteria. The widespread implementation of New Public Management reforms is depicted as a key driver in this transition (Freidson, 2001; Sacks & Muzio, 2018). Several studies have analyzed how regulated professions cope with these changes by developing discourses and implementing strategies associated with so-called defensive professionalism. The latter term emphasizes the defense and protection of traditional jurisdictional boundaries, mainly for the benefit of the profession's elite (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2008). From this perspective, platforms are more than simply new actors encroaching on professional jurisdictions. Rather, they constitute new organizational and entrepreneurial forms based on algorithmic management (Kirchner & Schüßler, 2019). As such, they have the potential to introduce new rules "from above." This is a feature of "organizational professionalism" (Evetts, 2011, p. 407), where rules are not established by the professionals themselves but imposed by the organizations within which they operate. In order to analyze the current reconfiguration of types of professionalism, it is therefore relevant to study the ways in which platforms, like other new technologies, including artificial intelligence, machine learning, and algorithms, could thus reshape professional boundaries and forms of professionalism (Adams et al., 2020a, p. 226). Furthermore, their effects on professions and the professionalisms they adhere to might differ depending on different perceptions of professionalism prevalent within a given profession (Maestripieri & Bellini, 2023).

Our analysis builds on this literature to identify the heterogeneous pathways in which the introduction of platforms can impact a profession, an approach that has received little attention in platform economy research (Balsiger et al., 2023). It shows that some hoteliers have embraced a protective or defensive type of professionalism (Muzio & Ackroyd, 2005), relying on "protective shields" (Noordegraaf, 2020, p. 206) to counter the destabilization of their jurisdiction. By contrast, others have followed a more managerial or organizational approach by treating platforms as useful tools and valuable allies. And whereas related divisions already existed within the hospitality sector, we argue that the arrival of platforms has reinforced them.

Case study and methodology

Theoretical relevance of the case study
Like their counterparts in most other countries, Swiss hoteliers have been deeply affected by the rapid expansion of platforms in the tourism industry in the first decade of the 21st century

(OECD, 2018).[1] They often cite the 2008 financial crisis, which strengthened the Swiss franc at the expense of the country's tourism sector, as a driving force behind efforts to attract new customers by advertising rooms online. By 2022, OTAs were handling 27% of all Swiss hotel reservations, and the total share of online bookings (including those made on hotel websites) was continuing to rise, accounting for 48.4% of all overnight stays (Schegg & Ehrenzeller, 2023). At the time, the leading platforms were Booking.com (with a market share of about 77%), Expedia (15%) and HRS (3%).[2]

In addition to OTAs, hoteliers have had to deal with the impact of vacation apartment rental platforms like Airbnb. Whereas OTAs act as middlemen by allowing hotels to advertise their rooms online, Airbnb operates as a peer-to-peer network (Gazzoli et al., 2008; Kirchner & Beyer, 2016) that engages in what hoteliers consider unfair competition. This article focuses exclusively on OTAs, which have posed a fundamental threat to professional jurisdiction by limiting the decision-making autonomy of the professionals concerned. By contrast, Airbnb primarily threatens the integrity of jurisdictional boundaries.[3]

Although seldom studied under this angle, the occupational group of hoteliers shares several features characteristic of professions. Indeed, the professional associations representing a high percentage of practicing professionals negotiate the regulation of the profession with the authorities, especially in times of crisis (Tissot, 2022), monitor qualifications, training, and diplomas, and set up systems for assessing the quality of establishments, determining the services offered to customers. On this basis, hoteliers assert their professionalism (Cheng & Wang, 2015) while having market autonomy to set room rates.

In the Swiss context, the small independent operators who historically dominated the ranks of hoteliers were successful in obtaining official recognition and regulation capacity. Founded in 1882, the Swiss Hotel Association sought to protect its jurisdiction and, for a long time, controlled the hotel market through favorable legislation and a patent system limiting the number of establishments (Humair & Tissot, 2011). In the 1980s, the organization successfully adopted a stars-based classification system, a classic example of internal self-regulation (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014). However, the control by the professional organization of market

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[1] The research was conducted in 2020 and 2021, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The latter's impact is therefore not addressed.

[2] https://www.hotelleriesuisse.ch/fr/association-et-siege-admin/actualites/news-etude-de-distribution, accessed on October 16, 2023; https://www.hotelleriesuisse.ch/fr/branche-et-politique/politique-economique/economie-numerique/ota-lex-booking/download-B73ABF53-A8FA-4D6A-9CAF-4164EFAB5ACB.secure, accessed on October 16, 2023.

[3] With respect to peer-to-peer platforms, hoteliers are primarily interested in ensuring that professional norms (hygiene, safety, tourist tax, etc.) are applied to their emerging non-professional competitors. The containment of "invaders" by subjecting them to existing regulation is a recurrent pattern of professional competition (Abbott, 1988).

access suffered considerably in the course of neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s, when the market was liberalized (Humair & Tissot, 2011). More recently, the stars-based classification increasingly competes with user-based evaluations on platforms (Balsiger & Jammet, 2022). As a result of these changes in regulation and technology, the professional autonomy of hoteliers is increasingly threatened.

Today, the Swiss Hotel Association's 3,000 members represent more than 80% of the country's lodging establishments. Switzerland's highly diversified hospitality sector caters to both leisure and business travelers, including large numbers of visitors to mountain resorts (Humair & Tissot, 2011). As a result, establishments owned by small independents coexist with large properties belonging to international chains, as well as luxury hotels. Nevertheless, the prevailing trend toward concentration[4] has meant a decline in the number of family-run hotels. This is especially true in the mountains, where the number of nights booked has been falling at the same rate as it has been increasing in urban areas (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2020, p. 16).

The main limitation of our case study is the fact that the profession remains highly decentralized in Switzerland with powerful regional professional associations, which potentially increases internal divergences and consequently the coexistence between different types of professionalism.

Data collection

Our fieldwork involved in-person qualitative interviews with hotel owners or managers (n=10) and representatives of their professional associations (n=9, including three individuals who also owned or managed a hotel).[5] On a day-to-day basis, all these individuals were involved with maintaining professional boundaries through negotiations with external stakeholders (in this case, platform operators) while also making decisions relating to changes introduced by platforms. Each interview was conducted at the research participant's workplace and lasted between one and two-and-a-half hours.

Very early in the study, we discovered that the Swiss Hotel Association and its regional counterparts (two of which were represented in the study) did not necessarily see eye-to-eye on the question of digital platforms.[6] On the one hand, the national association and a regional

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[4] The number of establishments fell by about 2% in 2018 while the total number of beds remained constant and the average size of a hotel has grown to 57 beds (Swiss Hotels Directory, 2019, https://www.sgh.ch/fileadmin/documents/Downloads/Publikationen_SGH/2019/Jahrbuch_der_Schweizer_Hotellerie_2019.pdf, accessed on January 26, 2021).

[5] The complete research design also includes interviews with distribution channel representatives (n=2, including one OTA representative), IT services company representatives (n=4), and industry experts (n=4). This article focuses on actors who are dealing with change from within the profession.

[6] Where possible, we also consulted the activity reports and websites of these professional bodies for insight into how they have addressed the issue of digital platforms.

branch based in a large urban area were more inclined to work with platforms and accept the changes they have introduced. On the other hand, a branch based in a mountain region, whose members were more focused on leisure tourism, was more critical of platforms and their impact. To explore the issue in more depth, we asked the hotel association representatives we interviewed to refer us to 10 hotels with a three- or four-star rating (the most common ratings for members of both regional associations concerned) and that had taken different approaches to dealing with OTAs. This helped diversify the range of individual establishments covered by our study. Based on an assessment of how these different hotels had been affected by the introduction of platforms, we grouped them into three categories defined by property type and market segment: (1) small, family-run mid-market hotels; (2) chain hotels; and (3) independent luxury hotels. Together, these categories are broadly representative of the Swiss hotel industry as a whole. Among the interviewees based in the urban area, three worked at chain hotels (corporately owned or franchises), and four were managers or company executives. By contrast, all research participants based in the mountains were owner-operators of smaller hotels.

Data analysis

Analysis followed an iterative abductive process (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) that involved a theoretically informed reading of the interview data followed by the identification of core themes through open coding (Miles et al., 2014). The two researchers who conducted the interviews were also responsible for coding the data (using Atlas-ti software). Analysis focused on themes relevant to the relationship between individual hoteliers (and, to a lesser extent, their professional associations) and OTAs. We began by coding references to OTA practices, especially those most likely to be seen as threats to professional autonomy: new conditions imposed by the platforms (commissions, contractual terms, cancellation policies, etc.) and new skills- or technology-based requirements (IT skills, channel management software, point-of-sale systems, etc.). We then classified hoteliers according to whether they felt that their relationship with OTAs opened up new professional opportunities or posed a threat to their ability to make autonomous decisions and to the profession's capacity for self-regulation. Finally, we assessed the extent to which our categories aligned with notions of professionalism that emphasized protecting or defending the profession's traditional jurisdiction, that encouraged closer collaboration with platforms, or that involved a mix of both.

Findings

Our analysis of the interview data highlighted two dimensions of how the introduction of digital platforms has disrupted the capacity of hoteliers as a professional group to manage their own affairs. The first concerns the trade-off between the increased visibility achieved through online advertising and the conditions imposed by OTAs. Some research participants believed that such conditions threatened their professional status by undermining their capacity for autonomous decision-making. This was especially true for small hotel owners who were used to setting room rates by hand and who are seeing this skill called into question. Second, we

found two opposing perceptions of platforms within the group, depending on whether hoteliers favored a more standardized or more personalized relationship with customers. Research in the sociology of professions has identified claims to offer services tailored to the needs of individual clients as a well-established strategy for defending a traditional form of professionalism (Flood & Robb, 2019; Freidson, 2001; Hughes, 1984). This vision is opposed to external standardized evaluation principles, particularly managerial ones.

Commissions and parity clauses: A threat to professional autonomy?

OTAs have restructured the hotel market by charging a commission on every transaction they facilitate (Kirchner & Beyer, 2016). In terms of the sociology of professions, this provides a classic example of an external actor changing the conditions under which members of an existing profession have traditionally carried out their work while undermining the profession's capacity for self-regulation. In this section, we discuss the different ways in which Swiss hoteliers have reacted to these developments.

Most research participants recognized that OTAs have greatly increased their marketing reach by allowing them to advertise rooms online at a scale they could not achieve on their own. Although commissions have increased the ratio of fixed expenses to sales, many hoteliers have accepted this as a reasonable cost for expanding their customer base, with little impact on their ability to control their own work. For example, the owner-operator of a 20-room establishment argued that platforms provided the only way to reach new customers:

> So, I would say that for a small hotel like mine, it's very important to treat OTAs as partners since we can't afford to spend the kind of money on advertising that Booking.com and Expedia spend on our behalf.

The manager of a 300-room international chain hotel put it this way:

> I couldn't survive without Booking.com. Just think of the international reach that site gives me. It's enormous. As an individual hotel, I could never achieve that without Booking.com. That's why it's important not to just complain about OTAs. We should also see them in a positive light.

These two interviewees clearly believed that they benefited from allying themselves with their platform-based "partners." By claiming that they "couldn't survive" without platforms, they sought to emphasize crucial benefits over fears regarding increased dependency or lost autonomy. Given that both these individuals managed hotels based in the urban area and sat on the board of the regional hotel association, they were also well positioned to cope with commission charges. In the Swiss context, chain hotels operating in regions that attract both business and leisure travelers, such as the urban area covered by our study, can negotiate lower per-transaction charges based on their annual customer volumes. Meanwhile, better-performing establishments—those that receive consistently good reviews and maintain low

cancellation rates—can obtain "preferred partner" status, earning them a more prominent position in result lists on OTA websites.[7] This status, created by the platforms, introduces a new external principle of competition between hoteliers that has not been decided upon by the profession.

While recognizing that platforms provided them with marketing reach they could not achieve on their own, other interviewees were clearly anxious about paying significant commissions to distant intermediaries over which they had no control. Eager for its members to regain full control over their own affairs, the regional hotel association based in the mountains even launched its own commission-free booking platform. As one board member explained:

> This means that, every year, rather than being paid to Booking.com, millions in commissions remain in the pockets of hoteliers, allowing them to renovate their properties, to do things that… if they had to pay these commissions to middlemen… well, the money would no longer be in their pockets, they would no longer have access to it.

A broader aim of the initiative was to regain control over the professional group—both financially and symbolically[8]—by assuming the role now played by third-party booking platforms. However, the Swiss Hotel Association and several other regional branches, all of which advocate close collaboration with leading OTAs, have not been supportive. Clearly, this is an instance where digital platforms have divided the professional group. By applying different commission rates, they foster competition between hoteliers. The owner-operator of a luxury hotel in a prestigious mountain resort described how this prevents unified action:

> [Three years ago], we launched a campaign calling on all the hotels [affiliated with the resort] to leave Booking.com's preferred partners system. […] Out of 40 properties, a dozen said: "I'll only do it if everyone else does." […] We tried to get everybody on the same page, but it just didn't work out.

Swiss hoteliers have been somewhat more united in challenging another condition introduced by OTAs: so-called parity clauses. Included in the contracts signed by hotel managers and owners, such provisions prohibit establishments from offering lower prices via any other distribution channel, including on the property's own website or to walk-in clients. Individual

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[7] According to Booking.com website, establishments with this status pay 3% more in commissions (i.e., 15% on each transaction, instead of 12%). Preferred partners get to display "a special 'thumbs-up' seal of approval" next to their property page, a measure intended to boost consumer confidence. Supposedly, these hotels "receive up to 65% more page views and on average 20% more bookings." https://partner.booking.com/en-gb/help/growing-your-business/increase-revenue/all-you-need-know-about-preferred-partner-programme (accessed on March 23, 2023).

[8] The association's reports show that it is very difficult to estimate exactly what is paid to Booking.com in relation to the new customers it attracts.

hoteliers, especially small independents, see parity clauses as a direct attack on their professional jurisdiction. One association representative, himself an establishment owner, vehemently condemned the infringement on his "commercial freedom":

> Hoteliers have lost the right to offer rooms at a lower price. But that's nonsense. Just imagine [...]! But that's nonsense. It's your business. […]

And like its counterparts across Europe, the Swiss Hotel Association has publicly argued that parity clauses constitute a major infringement of professional autonomy insofar as they represent an attempt by platforms to overstep their role as intermediaries. The organization has raised the issue with the Competition Commission, the federal regulator responsible for enforcing Swiss competition law. It also sought out allies in its efforts to lobby for better regulation of platforms, a traditional strategy employed by professional groups seeking to secure their jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988; Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2008). However, it proved difficult to find politicians willing to support the cause. It was only after the mobilization of regional tourism representatives and appeals to the general principle of free competition that new legislation protecting hoteliers' ability to set their own prices was passed in 2020 and implemented in 2022.[9]

Customers versus guests: Customer relations as a skills issue exacerbated by platforms

Generally speaking, the introduction of digital platforms compels professionals to develop new skills and abandon familiar ways of working (Dubois et al., 2019; Meilvang, 2023). Technical skills are required to use digital tools, especially those that make it possible to reach clients (Velthuis & van Doorn, 2020), whereas relational skills are needed to address new market segments and consumer habits (Buhalis, 2000; Gössling & Lane, 2015). We found that Swiss hoteliers were unequally equipped to acquire and use these new skills, with some even lacking websites of their own when OTAs first became popular. On the one hand, larger hotels with a specialized division of labor have been more likely to adopt the digital tools offered by platforms, especially yield and revenue management (RM) tools. On the other hand, family-run hotels have reacted by reviving more traditional approaches to customer care and retention.

Inspired by dynamic pricing models developed for the aviation industry, RM systems are designed to maximize occupancy rates and profitability through the automated analysis of supply, demand, and other market variables (Ivanov, 2014). However, effective RM strategies depend on the ability to forecast demand by market segment, something that can only be achieved by gathering and analyzing large quantities of high-quality data (Ivanov, 2014). Chain and luxury hotels tend to be the only establishments with the financial means necessary to hire staff specialized in these complex tasks or to outsource the work (Melis & Piga, 2017). As

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[9] The revised law is available at the following address: https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/oc/2022/690/fr.

the director of a major chain hotel based in the urban area explained: "We have specialized revenue managers working at our chain's European headquarters. We recruited them from the aviation sector […]." The manager of a neighboring luxury hotel pointed out that establishments where there is little division of labor cannot take advantage of these technical tools:

> In a small hotel […] that doesn't have a marketing manager, a revenue manager, or a sales manager […], a single person is responsible for reception, service, check-in, answering the phone, sending out email promotions, etc. So, these hotels struggle with online sales. Often, they become too dependent on a single OTA.

RM systems reflect a vision of client relations rooted in management strategies initially developed by marketing professionals, not hoteliers. International customer profiles are assessed based on trends and variations in the travel and tourism sector. With the encouragement of the local tourist office, the hotel association for the urban area has begun promoting this rather impersonal approach to customer relations and the associated skills as the best means of attracting tourists who might otherwise stay at an Alpine establishment:

> For Indian, Chinese, and American visitors, [the city] and the Alps are the same thing. […] The client simply opts for seeing the Alps from [the city], and everyone's happy. […] But you wouldn't get away with telling an English or German tourist that the city and the Alps are the same thing.

In short, the RM systems and customer management concepts associated with OTAs encourage a high level of standardization and a focus on performance, two characteristics "of organizational rather than professional forms of occupational control" (Evetts, 2011, p. 412). For their part, the hotel owners we interviewed in the mountain region remained invested in a very different approach to customer relations, one based on interpersonal skills—precisely the kind of know-how that platforms, focusing on technical abilities, tend to devalue. These hoteliers emphasized how strong relationships with loyal "guests" (their preferred term), who return year after year, distinguish them from large hotels. One even mentioned how he drew his "passion for the profession" from the fact that return visitors "often become friends." This group saw the personalized treatment of guests as a true mark of professionalism that faced a significant threat from OTAs, whose algorithms continually suggest new destinations and properties to users based on their previous choices. As a small hotel owner explained, this discourages guests from returning to the same hotel: "Customers who reserve their room through Booking.com are customers the hotel will lose." As part of their commitment to maintaining control over guest relations, some hotel association representatives have criticized the lack of transparency surrounding the collection and use of customer data by OTAs. A representative of the hotel association based in the mountain region put it this way: "[…] people who register with Booking.com are no longer guests of the hotel. Instead, they become clients of the platform." Committed to preserving a diverse range of small independent lodging establishments, hoteliers in this category also strongly believe that providing a warm welcome

is the best way to build guest loyalty, in contrast to the management-driven approach adopted by other members of the profession, who focus on attracting new customers.

Discussion: Are platforms exacerbating tensions between different types of professionalism?

Our study confirms that changes introduced by OTAs have undermined key pillars of professionalism among hoteliers, namely the capacity for self-regulation with respect to managing reservations and customer relations. In terms of the sociology of professions, platforms are "newcomers" or "invaders" (Abbott, 1988; Muzio & Ackroyd, 2005) that have succeeded in substantially transforming the conditions under which the profession operates, despite their claims to be nothing more than useful frameworks for facilitating certain tasks. Our analysis highlights how research participants not only reacted differently to the situation depending on the characteristics of their hotels, but they did so in a way that reinforced pre-existing divisions within the profession.

Produced within the sociology of professions framework, these findings fill a theoretical gap in research on the relationship between platforms and professions. Relevant work published to date, which has primarily come from either the field of the sociology of technology or that of organizational and management studies, largely portrays platforms as having a uniform impact tied to their use of technology and especially algorithms. By contrast, our analysis shows how the reactions of hoteliers to the rise of the platform economy vary according to the types of hotels they manage, the ways of working that are familiar to them, and their understanding of customer relations. More specifically, the new skills required to benefit from platform-based technologies are much harder to acquire for small, family-owned establishments that lack the human and financial resources at the disposal of large chain hotels.[10] Similar dynamics have been observed within professional groups such as delivery drivers and freelancers (Alasoini et al., 2023).

By continuing to pursue this line of research, scholars can further explore questions regarding how the arrival of platforms brings into tension different ways of practicing and conceiving the profession (Arcidiacono et al., 2023), which reflect different positions, locations, and professional identities. Sociologists of professions have variously described clashes between those who support organizational or professional forms of control (Evetts, 2011); between those who favor defensive or hybrid professionalism (Hodgson et al., 2015; Muzio & Ackroyd, 2005; Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011); and, most recently, between proponents of protective and connective approaches (Noordegraaf, 2011, 2020).

Recently, Eyal (Adams et al., 2020a, p. 228) argued that researchers should pay greater attention to the spatial distribution of professionals and how it produces different approaches to

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[10] Tourism studies have documented this phenomenon for different types of hotels rather than by comparing them (Buhalis, 2000; Gössling & Lane, 2015).

coping with technological challenges, especially the introduction of platforms. In our case study, hoteliers based in large urban areas, their regional associations, and the Swiss Hotel Association all tended to embrace managerial techniques for advertising rooms and managing clients. This outlook is well aligned with the tools offered by OTAs. By contrast, hoteliers based in the mountain region were more concerned with preserving their professional autonomy and limiting reliance on foreign-owned OTAs, including developing their own platform. These divergences are rooted in different ways of understanding the nature of the profession and how its jurisdiction should be organized. They concern both the way the profession is practiced and the way it is conceived. In an interactionist approach to professional groups, these perceptions crystallize different ways of embodying the professional role, summarized here in the oppositions between host or landlord, manager or owner. This role is part of a professional identity built up through professional socialization: managerial training versus heritage, on-the-job socialization, professional networks, and career models (Dubar et al., 2015).

Based on these divisions, the results of our study finally highlight the need to further examine how different types of professionalism coexist and interact (Adams et al., 2020a, 2020b). Are platforms reinforcing one type of professionalism to the detriment of another within a professional group? Rather than the disappearance of protective or defensive professionalism, our findings point to a clash between it and a more organizational and management-oriented type. Accordingly, sociologists of professions should acknowledge the ongoing tension between these two forms of professionalism rather than associating them with two distinct moments in time.

In the context of our study, some hoteliers were quick to ally themselves with OTAs because they do not perceive these digital platforms as a threat to their capacity for autonomous decision-making. Rather, they see OTAs as a means of enhancing their position and status within their profession. Meanwhile, other hoteliers have been much more reluctant to rely on OTAs. Instead, they emphasize a more classic form of defensive professionalism, seeking both to limit the control exerted by platforms and to maintain a personalized relationship with guests. Unable to counter the power of digital platforms on their own, these hoteliers have had to fight to convince political authorities and economic regulators of the need to address their concerns (Demazière, 2018; Saks & Adams, 2019).

More broadly, we would argue that the impact of digital platforms should be understood in terms of a "set of forces" (Adams et al., 2020a, p. 228) capable of revealing conflicts and hierarchies, both old and new. In the case of Swiss hoteliers, we have shown how the introduction of platforms has amplified external pressures and accelerated the adoption of managerial tools, a well-studied phenomenon in the sociology of professions (Boussard et al., 2010). Because OTAs promote organizational and management-oriented approaches to maximizing occupancy rates and profitability, managerial professionalism—the history of which remains to be written, at least where hoteliers and the hotel industry are concerned—and platforms are mutually reinforcing. Professional organizations play a role in this balance, and research has

not yet focused sufficiently on them. In our case, we have shown that the regional associations (in urban and city areas) did not have the same vision of platforms, which confirms the coexistence of two types of professionalism. We might add that the national association is more inclined to support the same managerial vision as the urban association, as it has close links with representatives of the major cities. On the fundamental aspect of parity clauses, however, it has adopted a classic strategy of protecting jurisdiction by uniting the entire profession behind this objective. This indicates that the divisions are not completely clear-cut, with all professionals ultimately obliged to work with the platforms.

Conclusion

Digital platforms destabilize and reconfigure not only markets but professions as well. By highlighting this fact, our study fills a gap in the literature. On the one hand, we have shown how, beyond organizational and commercial concerns, the introduction of platforms also affects professional jurisdiction. On the other hand, our findings underscore the need for sociologists of professions to continue studying the impact of platforms on various professions. The extent of this impact will depend on the capacity of platforms to alter not only the rules governing transactions and the criteria for assessing performance but also a profession's jurisdiction and capacity for self-regulation.

As discussed above, Swiss hoteliers have reacted to the introduction of platforms in divergent ways. When assessing the relevance of our findings to other professions, researchers should pay close attention to differences in the division of labor within each professional group. Certain members of the profession have more resources at their disposal to cope with the introduction of platforms and, therefore, less to lose in terms of jurisdictional control and professional autonomy. This explains why legal professionals are more reluctant than journalists to changes associated with platforms (Christin, 2017). Expanding the scope of research to encompass professional groups like hoteliers also highlights the appeal of platforms to those professionals more inclined to adopt new managerial techniques and technological tools out of a desire to achieve greater efficiency. Likewise, some legal professionals invest in technology adapted to their area of specialization (Dubois et al., 2019), and some educators and health professionals offer their services via distance learning or advice platforms (van Dijck et al., 2019). From this perspective, recognizing the sheer variety of platforms being introduced helps reveal tensions rooted in different notions of professionalism.

Article history

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