

## **Precarity and New Media: Through the Lens of Indian Creators**

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Through critical reflection on the creator labor discussions in the new media economy and its application to the quotidian practices of Indian online content creators, I analyze the emerging industrial practices that are shaping India's new screen ecology with direct implications to the Indian media entertainment landscape. In doing so, the article highlights the distinct understanding of Indian online creator labor to argue the several ways in which the creators perform agency while negotiating with social media platforms. I articulate 4 broad categories in which precarious creativity is dealt with, on and through social media, as they balance the structural tensions between old and new media. Findings also suggest the creator's preference to deal with precarious creativity on social media platforms than having to struggle with creative hegemony and closed-door networks of Indian traditional media.

*Keywords: creator labor, platform economy, India, new media, creator affordances, precarity, social media*

How do online content creators use agency to negotiate the "precarity" surrounding social media platforms as they navigate the structural tensions within the Indian media landscape? In analyzing Indian online content creators' quotidian practices on social media, I argue that the use of social media for content creation stems from multiple motivations. Despite well-proven cases of precarity, immaterial labor, and exploitation practices of social media (Terranova, 2004) that feed capitalistic tendencies (Duffy & Hund, 2015), my research builds on evidence from the ground in India, to demonstrate how creators constantly embrace social media affordances as ways to advance their aspirations within the inequitable Indian media landscape.

In particular, this research seeks to comprehend the reasons behind Indian creators' preference toward using social media as a preferred medium of expression. I highlight multimodal practices of content creators (Cunningham & Craig, 2017), who typically use social media to promote their talents, such as stand-up comedy, acting, or content such as sketches or Web series. Second, I discuss the diurnal practices

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of creators who coproduce content on platforms to seek status among social media communities as well as expand their business through monetary rewards. Third, I trace the pathways of select online content creators in India to discuss the strategic ways in which creators use social media as a calling card to demonstrate a range of creative work that serves as the skill-based portfolio for seeking projects (McRobbie, 2002) in media industries. Building cultural and commercial capital by way of collaborations, brand monetization, likes, and subscription on social media helps Indian creators in dealing with precarity and negotiating relationships across the deeply hierarchical creative setups of Indian media industries. The agency is reflected in the way creators organize themselves to form their ventures and use platform-specific branding strategies (Scolere, Pruchniewska, & Duffy, 2018) to monetize content on social media (van Dijck, 2013). In doing so, the "material" benefits of commerciality, collaboration, and popularity that these creators derive from social media (van Dijck, 2013) are central to establishing their presence within Indian circuits of production culture. This is because an emerging segment consists of creators who are either disillusioned by the "hegemonic" practices of traditional media (Kay, 2018), have been rejected owing to its "feudalistic practices" (Mehta & Kaye, 2019), or simply do not form part of the "elitist" closed networks of Indian films and television industries (Punathambekar, 2013) owing to their modest socioeconomic backgrounds. At the same time, despite having the freedom to create content and fulfill career aspirations, the creators eventually end up serving the capitalistic structures in performing these transactions.

For many of these creators, using social media serves as an entry to situate themselves, even if precariously, within the competitive media setups that otherwise are notorious for privileging one creator from another, owing to their social relations. As I will show, the multitasking characteristic of social media, which is essentially a method of keeping the costs of production low, ends up serving as a rather useful exercise in skill building and a demonstration of multiple talents. At the same time, rather than classifying the creators based on social media affordances, this article highlights the "sense making" of content creators and their strategic use of YouTube and Facebook to achieve cultural and commercial forms of capital. In doing so, I rebalance the literature's emphasis on platform centrality, which tends to look from the top down with meaningful interventions on platforms, and users at scale, whereas my findings demonstrate how creators actually deal with precarity.

In addressing these key questions, I realize that my work sits at the intersection of critical media industry studies and sociology of work and careers approach. I could certainly see how my study of finding power dynamics through social and economic capital of creators specializing in social media content creation practices fits well within the contours of critical media industries studies (Havens, Lotz, & Tinic, 2009). As Hebert, Lotz, and Punathambekar (forthcoming) argue, "YouTube could serve as a site from which to make broader claims about various sectors and practices of digital media industries and their intricate links with established screen industries."

On the other hand, Curtin and Sanson's (2016) scholarship on precarious creativity posits how the earlier studies on sociology of work and careers of creators offer "empirically rich inquiries into the personal and professional lives of creative workers in advertising, fashion, design, music, new media, and the arts" (p. 9). By building on the previous findings on inequalities within the Indian traditional media, my research comprehends the dynamic ways in which creators are finding ways to challenge the status quo by building their careers or business ventures through social media.

### Method

Drawing on the combination of 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews, 12 e-mail interviews ( $N = 42$ ) with online content creators as well as document analysis (see Bowen, 2009) of select creators, I focus on the enhanced awareness and the skillful negotiation of creators on social media in reaching their career aspirations. These creators include vloggers, stand-up comedians, cofounders or directors of digital media companies, writers and actors of Web series and sketches on YouTube and Facebook. My prior experience as a media practitioner for three years in India was useful in recruiting respondents. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify these creators. While identifying content creators for the study, I chose to focus on their popularity and dependence on social media and their use of these as a means for commercial or cultural capital, an approach previously used by Cunningham and Craig (2019) to identify creators in their study of global social media entertainment.

Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) was employed to depend on my "observations, interactions and materials" (p. 87). I did so by building a hypothesis on my previous experience as a media practitioner and then through e-mail interviews ( $n = 12$ ) and analysis of news, industry reports, as well as social media profiles of digital media companies and content creators. The e-mail interviews were conducted to identify broader themes to "pursue hunches and potential analytic ideas" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 87) about India's online creator culture. A combination of document analysis of key industry reports on Indian digital media, online content creators, and their YouTube contributions (views, subscribers), as well as e-mail interviews, were used to frame questions. This approach especially benefits research on creative industries whose shape and size stays volatile because of the constant cultural, social, and technological changes in the economy. My respondents were based in Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, and Ahmedabad. The majority ( $n = 35$ ) of my respondents were working in Mumbai at the time of the interview.

The majority of 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews lasted between 60 minutes and 90 minutes. Of the 30 interviews, 28 were conducted in person and 2 two over the telephone. In aligning with the grounded-theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), I kept field-notes to "record individual and collective action, anecdotes, observations" (p. 67). The interview questions were kept open ended so that the creators could reflect on their career aspirations, the objective behind posting content on social media, creative works that they have accomplished and the ones that are in the pipeline, and the opportunities that they have secured because of their fame and creativity.

These interviews were recorded on mobile phones and transcribed to ensure precision. Questions were specifically framed to understand how creators deal with precarity, the sense making of social media platforms and the opportunity of work arising from social media. All respondents agreed to disclose their identities, and therefore their names are used throughout the article. The respondents identified a number of social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp for pushing their content or for tailoring as per the platform's affordances, but discussions were specifically focused on the use of YouTube and Facebook, given the ability of these platforms to facilitate longer durations of audiovisual content and their popularity among Indian users (Statistia, 2019).

### **Indian Online Media Landscape**

Looking to India to make sense of Internet creator culture is pertinent, given that India is poised to become a US\$5 billion online video economy with more than 650 million Internet users by 2023 (Samtani & Jindal, 2018). The government has expedited the process of 5G under the National Digital Communication Policy launched by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI; "TRAI Chief Sees New Govt.," 2019). Meanwhile, Indian conglomerate Reliance's entry into the telecom sector through Reliance Jio has been instrumental in expanding Internet access across the country (Mukherjee, 2019). Besides investing \$42 billion in digital infrastructure, Jio scaled the overall Internet consumption in India by providing low-cost 4G Internet rates along with Jio smartphones. This strategy has caused major telecom operators to reduce data prices, lowering the overall access and barrier to Internet consumption (Mukherjee, 2019).

Increased digital video consumption has also attracted interest from media businesses, as evidenced by about 40 Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms streaming in India (Das, 2019). Reports predict that India is on course to become the top 10 OTT market globally ("Video on Demand," 2018, p. 39). Content creators in India have been quick to identify this demand and have begun to create content on social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook (Kay, 2018; Kumar, 2016). These platforms afford creators greater creative autonomy (van Dijck, 2013) while also enabling the use of platform analytics for monetization (Burgess & Green, 2018). Further evidence of the rise and popularity of Indian online content creators can be observed from YouTube's growth in India with 265 million monthly active users and more than 1,200 creators with more than 1 million subscribers ("India Is Now YouTube's Largest," 2019).

### **Precarious Creativity**

The advent of the Internet has seen an unprecedented change in creator labor conditions (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Several scholars have pointed out that digital media labor posits deeper concerns than the celebration of its participatory culture, criticizing the Internet as the new medium of labor exploitation for capitalist motives (Arvidsson, 2005; Cohen, 2008; Terranova, 2004). Critics of online creator labor draw from the Marxian notion of uncompensated labor and unaccounted surplus labor. Media scholar Alex Callinicos (2009) describes this situation in which "workers are compelled to sell their labor-power to the capitalists on terms that lead to their exploitation" (p. 68). Scholars such as Terranova (2004) and (Miller, 2010) warned against premature celebrations over the prospect of the creation of jobs by the new media economy. Terranova (2004), for instance, highlighted the concept of immaterial labor to articulate how the new media economy exploited free labor in return for capital accumulation.

However, the concept of immaterial labor was used earlier in Lazzarato's (1996) labor study, in which he defined it as "the labour that produces the information and cultural content of the commodity" (p. 133). But it was Terranova's interest in studying the digital economy that also contributed significantly to the scope of further studies in areas of user-generated content. She contended that the new media economy's creation and consumption practices echoed capitalistic traits by relying on the affective labor of users. These dynamics were systematically disguised by celebrating voluntary and unpaid work as a contribution to knowledge. Miller (2010) argues that "precarity and flexibility" were the new labor norms.

He drew comparisons between the culture of traditional and new media labor classes and posited that the new labor class functioned under the notions of freedom and flexibility.

Arvidsson (2005) argued as to how the free labor of consumers was productively used by brands to their advantage by creating "social bond, a shared experience and common identity" (p. 235). Similarly, Cohen (2008) argued while studying Facebook's political economy that the platform encouraged "free or immaterial labour for the purpose of capital accumulation" (p. 18). Duffy and Hund (2015) suggest similarities between traditional media labor and digital media labor working conditions in their study of women fashion bloggers. They argued that though the bloggers worked under the notion of authenticity, social belonging, and participatory culture, they were subjected to the same traditional labor conditions that are governed by hierarchy, marketplace, and quantifiable objectives. The scholars define these conditions as aspirational labor practices taken up by women to confirm unpaid labor practices in the hope that it will generate social capital returns.

### **Precarity Within Indian Media Landscape**

Within the Indian context, Sangeet Kumar (2016) discusses the precarious creativity of online creator labor in India through his study of five creative entrepreneurs from diverse genres such as vlogging, cooking, and fashion blogging who are finding it difficult to negotiate the commerciality owing to YouTube's changing algorithm and growing competition. However, though the term "precarious" may be useful in foregrounding our understanding of the political economy of digital media, inherent complexities are distinct to the Indian new media landscape and need to be better contextualized to summarize contemporary Indian digital labor practices.

First, obtaining career opportunities within Indian film and television industries is increasingly difficult because of their reliance on "kinship ties and close-knit social networks" (Punathambekar, 2013, p. 70) and "creative feudalistic" structures (Mehta & Kaye, 2019, p. 12) respectively. The nepotistic tendencies within these industries have made it increasingly difficult for emerging creators to find opportunities and build meaningful careers. Though corporatization within traditional media brought transparency and structure to the media-making process, it did little in terms of challenging the gatekeeping practices of sorts that Punathambekar (2013) has highlighted. While working within the content development team of a corporate creative setup (Viacom18) across films and online verticals for three years, the team would often profile screen incumbents (writers, actors, directors, independent producers, stand-up comedians) based on their prior experience, even before they had pitched their ideas. The risk-taking quotients in genres as well as creator labor were extremely rare. Often, the same traditional media professionals would get work opportunities due to their existence within privileged creator and producer circuits. Their requests for collaboration are often attended to earlier than any of the newcomers.

Second, the industrial practices within the overall Indian film and television industries have a well-documented history of being "hegemonic," with broadcasters and studio executives having a final say on every creative decision (Kay, 2018; Kumar, 2016). While studying the industrial logics and media texts of prime-time Indian soap operas between 2000 and 2008, Munshi (2012) argues that television broadcasters, as well as producers, would rely on guesswork to imagine the suitability of content. While critiquing Indian

television's industrial practices, Mehta (2012) symbolizes television content as "low levels of innovation in programming and constant repetition of anything that seemed to work" (p. 616). Most of my respondents who have worked previously in the television/film medium acknowledged this excessive interference as a crucial reason for shifting to digital labor. At the same time, general entertainment television channels only produce an average of three to three and a half hours of original content per day (FICCI-EY, 2018, p. 36), often handed out to the same group of cherry-picked producers, often leaving emerging talent high and dry. Third, the issues of censorship on television continue to remain an obstacle for creators who are looking to YouTube and Facebook as a "dynamic outlet in which discourses of the nation, identity, censorship, feminism and representation" are undertaken (Kay, 2018, p. 1). Lack of governmental regulations and a lesser degree of circumscribed agency as opposed to television has helped social media in amassing an emerging pool of creators looking to experiment in diverse forms of storytelling.

The creators that form the subject matter of discussion are the ones that own medium-agnostic creator aspirations but are not part of the elite cultural hierarchy and are precarious quite simply because of their systematic exclusion. By negotiating their creativity on social media, creators, as well as media companies specializing in digital content creation, are gaining wider acceptance from the online audience for their creativity and then using it as a form of currency for circulation within the overall Indian media entertainment landscape. At the same time, the intelligence of the creators in negotiating the capitalistic motives of the social media platforms and materializing their aspirations places them on the same side of the equation as the capitalist power factions in the digitized economy. In other words, they deal with precarity by serving and supporting capitalist structures that reproduce the same inequalities that they are meant to address (Herman & McChesney, 2003). However, the availability of social, economic, and cultural capital derived by serving in the digitized economy still offers a better chance of building a meaningful career as an outsider.

This is not to negate Sangeet Kumar's (2016) meaningful intervention. As pointed out by my respondents, the precarity arises from various factors such as consistency of content creation, choosing a topic for creation, imagining a community in terms of relevance, searching for brand partnerships, networking for collaboration with fellow social media creators, and off-line networking with industry practitioners to list a few. The uncertainties of dealing in the digital media economy are quite glaring and obvious to be overlooked. However, the preference of dealing with this kind of precarity as opposed to waiting for traditional media to spot one's talent is what sets the digital economy apart. The hope of building on the fame and creativity produced on social media as evidence for gathering work of preferred choice across the Indian media entertainment landscape overrides the precarity that creators experience on social media. By exploring the actualities of these transactions, my research attempts to take a creator-centric approach in underlining how and why precarity on the digital media economy is preferred.

### ***Dealing with Precarity via Social Media***

Vaibhav Sethia, a former architect and a stand-up comedian with 170,113 subscribers on YouTube and 11,446,517 cumulative views from uploading seven stand-up comedy videos as of June 2019, identified YouTube as a platform "for reaching a larger audience" (V. Sethia, personal communication, October 25, 2018). Sethia uses many social media platforms to reach his audience—specifically, YouTube to upload

videos of his work, and Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat to publicize shows and personal use. This is akin to Burgess and Green's (2018) articulation of "cross-platform" (p. 84) strategies of creators. So, though an increase in viewership on YouTube earns revenue for him, his low uploading count in the past two years helps to ascertain his dependence on YouTube for popularity and promotion than for monetization. Sethia also identifies himself more as a "stand-up comedian" than a "YouTuber," crediting YouTube for "establishing stand-up (comedy) as a full-time career choice in India" (V. Sethia, personal communication, October 25, 2017).

Before stand-up comedy, Sethia tried various jobs, from working as an architect to assistant director in Bengali film. Eventually realizing his passion in stand-up comedy, Sethia, who hails from Kolkata, began performing stand-up shows in 2012, but struggled for paid gigs, as the stand-up comedy scene, especially in Kolkata, had not developed as well. However, as Kay (2018, p. 15) notes in her study on Indian Internet comedy, the advent of YouTube gave rise to the demand and popularity of stand-up comedy as a form of entertainment. Stand-up comedians eventually used social media platforms as a means to build a fanbase, in the hope that some would eventually turn up for their live events, while using the social media following as evidence to convince comedy clubs. Popular stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra noted how "tickets wouldn't sell if comics weren't promoting themselves online" (Mishra, 2019, para. 5). Sethia's popularity on social media platforms also led Amazon Prime to sign him for stand-up comedy special show, *Don't*, in 2018.

Online content creators today are increasingly self-aware of their motivations behind using social media, whether it is for self-expression (Livingstone, 2008), promotion, or commerce. As Sidharth Dudeja, upcoming stand-up comedian with a modest following of 24,000 subscribers on YouTube<sup>2</sup> noted, "I don't care about subscriber base or numbers. I just want people to appreciate my jokes" (S. Dudeja, personal communication, October 28, 2017). Chamoli and Sethia's illustrations demonstrate the intelligence of the creators in negotiating the capitalistic motives of the social media platforms in materializing their aspirations.

Malaby (2006) makes similar assertions in his study, in which he argues that the online exchange among virtual communities occurs in the form of cultural capital (see Bourdieu, 2010). Malaby concurred from his study of online multiplayer games that the digital media economy could not be studied from the perspective of economic capital alone, as the accumulation of content provided more power and agency to the creator as opposed to traditional media industries. For instance, Indian YouTuber Nikunj Lotia, who creates comedy sketches on his YouTube channel "Be YouNick" since 2014 has evolved into a full-time online creator and amassed more than 3 million followers as of June 2019 (Lotia, 2014).<sup>3</sup> Hailing from a small city named Dombivali near Mumbai, Lotia, who comes from a nonmedia background and worked as a freelance bartender, began creating videos in 2013 "for fun" (Lotia, personal communication, October 3, 2017). Lotia's popularity and social media revenue enable him to collaborate with brands and Bollywood celebrities for marketing and promotion activities. As noted by Cunningham and Craig (2019), several creators started on social media as "hobbyists with little intention of developing income" (p. 16), but over time, the lure of social, cultural, and economic rewards through YouTube's programmatic advertising, fans, and subscribers

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/siddharthdudeja/featured>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/beyounick>

on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have encouraged them to sustain their content creation practices on social media.

Meanwhile, the low-entry barrier has also enabled them to experiment with their business venture on social media, as was observed in Kopal Khanna's case, a 27-year-old cofounder of Tape A Tale, who left her well-paying job in Mumbai to start her storytelling venture with her friend. The anxiety around getting stories for her venture, the website for which was designed by her cousin, and the high cost of living led Khanna to take two freelance jobs before the venture found storytellers and online audience. Khanna's business revolves around organizing storytelling events based on curated stories received for the live event. Selected stories are recorded and uploaded on YouTube under the same channel name (K. Khanna, personal communication, March 19, 2018).<sup>4</sup> The event involves selected commoners sharing interesting anecdotes about their life experiences to the audiences in a ticketed event. She elaborated during the interview about how putting the stories on YouTube had helped her to gain new viewers as well as audiences for the event.

Khanna's social media usage suggests that she uses the platform to widen the visibility of her venture, which, in return, helps her to pitch to brands for integration opportunities. Further, she elaborated on how some of the storytellers had become "YouTube sensations" and had pursued their passion of storytelling by creating their own YouTube channel, some even leaving their full-time jobs in the process (K. Khanna, personal communication, March 19, 2018). As of June 2019, Tape A Tale's YouTube channel has more than 1 million subscribers with more than 56 million views and more than 78 thousand likes on its Facebook page.<sup>5</sup> Khanna and her partner's multimodal approach of establishing the business beyond the confines of social media helps the company in circumventing social media uncertainties and creating the economic value that is further derived from sponsorship, talent representation, and live-event ticket sales. At the same time, the coproduction activities of both Tape A Tale founders and its talent has enabled them to sustain as well as enhance opportunities for commercial and cultural rewards.

### ***Building a Media Career from Social Media***

Through the labor practices on social media, a new generation of Indian creators and media entrepreneurs experience the freedom of creative expression, attain popularity, and thereafter use it to achieve their dreams. Bhuvan Bam, who recently won Global Entertainer of the Year at Cannes, principally for his YouTube channel "BB Ki Vines", exemplifies the meaningful ways in which content creators begin their careers on social media. BB Ki Vines is primarily focused on creating vlogs, sketches, and short comedy videos and has more than 12 million subscribers (Bam, 2016)<sup>6</sup> as of June 2019. While discussing his online creative works in an interview, Bam described that he practiced as a singer, songwriter, and guitarist before becoming a YouTuber: "After my 12th boards (final exams) a guy offered me to sing in a restaurant. Till my second year of college, I used to perform at a Delhi restaurant. Then I started writing my own songs" (Arora, 2016, para. 6). In this manner, Bam, who was principally a musician, could create a popular satirical channel by conjuring multiple imaginary narratives laced with humor. The "vernacular creativity" (Burgess, 2006)

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWMGibmCqz-J7U\\_08ziHzdg/videos](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWMGibmCqz-J7U_08ziHzdg/videos)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/TapeAtale/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqwUjrj10mAEsqzCItqvwEw>



on the Internet is a result of the social media affordances that empower creators to engage in multiple genres of entertainment and forge their career trajectories, as is evident in Bam's social media performance as an actor, vlogger, writer, and editor.

Though one cannot ignore the struggle and precarious creativity that most social media creators undergo in their quotidian practices, it is hard to imagine this kind of autonomy in traditional media. Furthermore, the high-risk investment in the production culture often dissuades the producers from taking risks in storytelling. Social media, in comparison, besides giving an opportunity to newcomers, also offers freedom to explore multiple talents. Most of my interviewees who have previously worked on television as actors, writers suggested their frustration with television's industrial practices. They argued that the overreliance on soap opera limited their ability to express creatively. Online creators, like Bam, are not afraid of innovating with their roles, as Bam has appeared as an actor in multiple long-form content (hereafter Web series), commissioned on YouTube channel Happii Fi (owned by television network Sri Adhikari Brothers Television Network Ltd) and TVF (owned by Contagious Online Media Pvt. Ltd.), respectively. In late September 2018, he became the first Indian online content creator to reach 10 million subscribers (Ghose, 2018).

Bam also teamed up with Guneet Monga, well known producer of films such as *The Lunchbox*, *Gangs of Wasseypur*, and *Masaan* to star in a short film titled *Plus Minus* ("Plus Minus," 2018), written and directed by Jyoti Kapur Das, whose previous short film, *Chutney*, was also released on YouTube and received 125 million views.<sup>7</sup> In *Plus Minus*, Bam plays a 22-year-old Indian army soldier, which required him to prove a high level of acting—marking a dramatic shift from his previous narratives of satire and humor. The film has received immense praise from critics and Internet audiences alike, receiving 18 million views as of June 14, 2019.<sup>8</sup>

Das's prior experience as a media practitioner spans across Indian television, film, and new media, donning roles of writer, producer, and director during the journey. The acceptability from the audience and skilled film professionals suggests that there lies an opportunity for online creators who are keen to navigate from new media to old media. Bollywood film producers are not shy to bet their money on an online content creator simply because of the creator's YouTube origins. On the contrary, by releasing the short film on his YouTube channel, the producers and the director managed to use Bam's popularity to gather ready-made audience (J.K. Das, personal communication, March 15, 2018). Thus, this also goes to show that the makers also trusted in his ability to translate the script to the screen based on his portfolio of low-budget vlogs and sketches.

Bam's popularity among his subscriber base led him to become the brand ambassador for Mivi, an electronics brand that also came on board as cosponsors for the short film. Moreover, the engagement between India's YouTube sensation with successful film industry professionals also meant a flurry of articles covering the news about the short film, creating a buzz around the film. It is remarkable to see how YouTubers like Bhuvan Bam build their confidence from the fame and popularity to innovate and scale their productions. At the same time, creators can balance out the tensions between authenticity and commerce (Cunningham & Craig, 2017) as they professionalize their content creation practices. In 2018, Bam also performed a sketch

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0krwKbsQscw>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKyXUJceZ6k>

with mainstream Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan,<sup>9</sup> who promoted his film *Zero* on Bam's channel, further strengthening Bam's popularity as an "influencer" (see Abidin, 2015) and Bollywood's necessity to include promotions on online content creator's channels as a part of film marketing strategy.

The intermingling of digital media labor with film industry professionals is another example of the emerging power dynamics between Bollywood and Internet creator culture. The platform economy, therefore, as the article argues, consists of content creators who can use networked technologies to their advantage. Bam's case study is meant to highlight how a commoner hailing from a middle-class Delhi household with no connections in the film or television industry used social media to carve an identity for himself within the media industry landscape. Bam's case also exemplifies how earning social media is simply not enough to sustain one's media career. Building connections with established traditional media circuits can help the creator to navigate the structural tensions that arise out of each medium—uncertainty on social media and the nepotistic tendencies of traditional media.

### ***Sense Making of Platform Affordances***

By sense making, I mean to show how Indian creators use social media affordances. The creators make the distinction between YouTube and Facebook as they seek to commercialize their practices across these platforms. As observed in previous instances, the digital media economy not only enables participatory framework (Jenkins, 2008) but also encourages opportunities for self-employment (Ross, 2013) and self-branding (Gandini, 2016) that can be used as a currency for circulation, collaboration, and monetization.

Cofounded by six postgraduates with degrees in advertising and public relations and four years or so of experience in digital agency, ScoopWhoop started out as a listicle but has eventually grown into a full-fledged media company, with funding from venture capital agencies in 2014 and 2016, running three Internet publications, namely, ScoopWhoop, the flagship brand; Vagabomb, a women-centric publication; and lastly GazabPost, which specializes in Hindi language content. Moreover, it also publishes its editorials—videos on social media platforms—to maximize its reach. Chief strategy officer of ScoopWhoop, Meghana Bhatt, noted that ScoopWhoop emerged as a venture to cater to the discerning young audience alienated by Indian television content (Bhatt, personal communication, March 27, 2018).

ScoopWhoop also runs YouTube channels to post audiovisual content such as "ScoopWhoop"<sup>10</sup> for short-form fiction comedy and music content with close to half a million subscribers as of January 2019; "Ok Tested," where its employees perform quirky entertaining challenges and tasks; "ScoopWhoop Unscripted" for nonfiction content such as interviews with celebrities, and Vox-pops for documentaries, both of which have a modest subscriber base of more than 100,000 subscribers. Moreover, in 2015,<sup>11</sup> ScoopWhoop also produced a successful Web-series fiction comedy, seven-part episodic Web show on YouTube titled *Baked*, a story of three university graduates who launch a food delivery start-up, which was

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsJK04TqQq0>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCx2HcmpB-UZGkMXOCJ4QIVA>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajxyYf3PENo&t=12s>

followed by its sequel in 2016,<sup>12</sup> averaging a million views for both the series. In many ways, ScoopWhoop's media practices are like the global media and entertainment company BuzzFeed, which is focused on producing videos and articles on contemporary issues (see Tandoc, 2018). Apart from YouTube, ScoopWhoop also creates content through multiple Facebook and Instagram channels. Because ScoopWhoop's profits are advertiser driven, and its existence depends on driving the audience's attention to its social media assets, the company's social media strategy could be a key to understand platform-specific audience traits. While discussing these, Bhatt asserts that they use YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram to reach their audience. Bhatt posits,

Facebook is used to build a brand and engagement as it has the maximum reach. Further, our page analytics suggest that Facebook has a low-retention span and therefore the focus is more on creating low-cost shareable content (memes, articles, sketches). On the contrary, as the YouTube audience prefers "binge watching" and therefore, the production quality is higher. (M. Bhatt, personal communication, March 27, 2018)

Similarly, there are many ways in which the perceived social media affordances feed into the distribution strategies of online media companies. TVF's sister vertical, Girliyapa, which specializes in content for females, also followed a unique content sharing strategy to reach its digital audience while dealing with the deluge of social media platforms. Girliyapa head Tracy D'Souza, in elaborating on the behavioral traits of medium-specific digital audiences shared the vertical's content strategy, says,

We have the main content for YouTube and then some small sketches that go on Facebook, Instagram, and even Twitter. It helps us to increase the reach of our main original content and helps in engaging with the audience. We primarily post on Facebook to increase the reach of our content. Users of Facebook go to connect with their friends, and while at it, they bump into the content on the platform. (T. D'Souza, personal communication, April 03, 2018)

As they navigate the uncertainties surrounding the economic outcome of social media, the creators' "sense making" of platforms and knowledge of platform-specific audiences enables them to produce different values from their usage of each social media platform (Scolere et al., 2018). Rather than using each of these platforms merely as distribution models, their usage is determined by their perceived affordances—Facebook for community building and YouTube for monetizing. Ultimately, the brands are attracted to the Facebook community base and are used as a medium of capital to attract more revenue. By applying these learnings, the content creators can sustain, engage, and multiply their audiences, inciting advertisers and multimedia platforms for collaboration in the process. At the same time, as Scolere (2019) concluded, from her study of graphic design professionals and their usage of social media, the implications of exercising platform-specific self-branding mean that online content creators must constantly modify their creations in consonance with the platform affordances.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zh0tbXa7Qus>

The popularity of original content creations and a nuanced understanding of audience can also assist a company in functioning as a traditional production company and pitching its “portfolio” (see Scolere, 2019) to streaming platforms, a strategy practiced by Arré, a digital entertainment content company founded by U Digital Content in 2016. Founded by a team of media professionals Ronnie Screwvala, Ajay Chacko, and B. Sai Kumar, the company leadership changed hands with Ronnie Screwvala exiting as an investor in place of Sanjay Rai Chaudhari (Bhattacharyya, 2016). In 2016, the company received funding of an undisclosed amount from Enam Holdings investment group to further accentuate their business plans and content offerings (Johari, 2016). With a workforce of 50 media professionals, Arré operates across social media verticals such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram while also serving as a producer, marketer, and distributor to television and streaming platforms.

Arré’s vice president of product and business development, Niyati Merchant, shared details about the company’s genre and format-agnostic content strategy, highlighting how Arré, since its inception in 2016, had produced sketches; Web series; documentaries; editorials; podcasts across comedy, thriller, food, travel, and adventure; and music segments. Unlike Indian television that strategizes its content as per genres, these companies have minimal restrictions and can diversify their portfolios better. Arré has also distributed content to several OTT platforms such as Ola Play, Jio, SonyLIV, YuppTV, TataSky besides collaborating with Saavn, an audio streaming platform to create the podcast *Trial by Error*. As of June 2019, it has more than 1.4 million subscribers on YouTube<sup>13</sup> and 1.7 million likes on Facebook.<sup>14</sup> The popularity of their content on social media ultimately served as their calling card, as streaming platform Times MX commissioned Arré to produce popular six-episode Web series sitcom on Indian startup culture, titled *Tathastu* (“Curated by Arré,” 2019). Naturally, its social media library of sketches and Web series also show the ability of its production team to mount short-form and long-form narratives. Additionally, Arré’s strong audience metrics of subscribers, views, and fan engagement on social media serve as a strong portfolio for engaging in business practices with brands and streaming platforms that are looking to target Indian online users. Figure 1 shows a Facebook post by Arré managing Viacom18’s streaming platform Voot’s social media promotion.

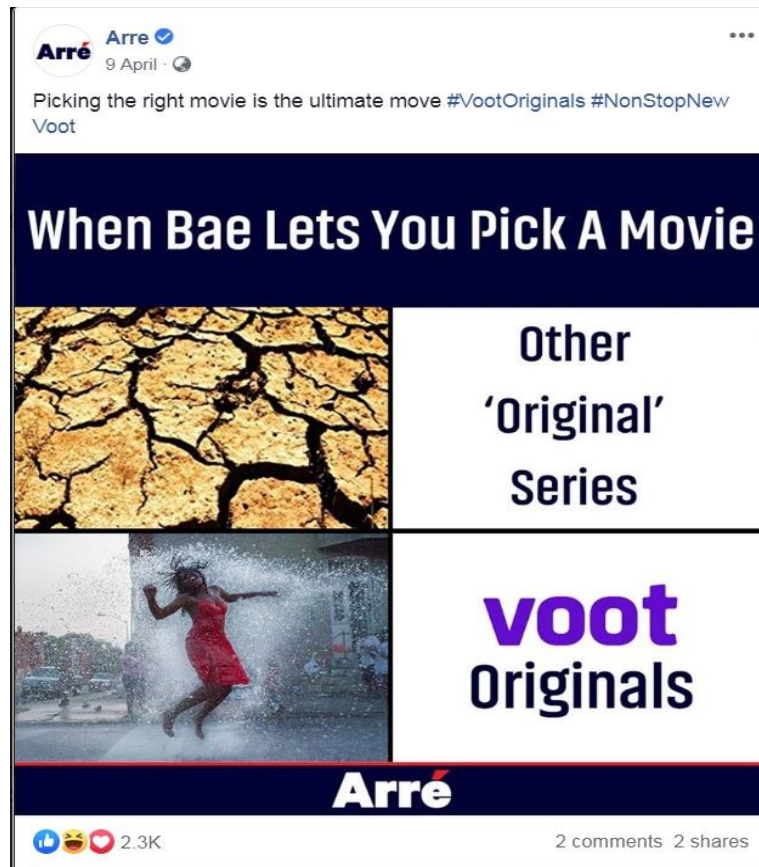
Earlier studies (Kücklich’s, 2005; Postigo, 2007) have articulated how video game modders’ online labor practices enabled them to achieve fame on social Web platforms. These studies asserted that the video game modders used this capital to obtain jobs and open further employment opportunities, which exemplifies yet another agentic choice that is afforded to creators. Siddharth Alambayan, creative head at Times Internet Ltd, the digital venture of the legacy media company *The Times of India*, one of the largest media and entertainment groups in India, asserted on the seamless nature of online content creators in securing future projects. While discussing the movement of creator labor within the new media ecology, Alambayan argued,

It’s become a society that lives by the osmosis of creators. Zakir Khan [comedian] can have his own [YouTube] channel, market small snippet videos on Facebook, and appear in an AIB [YouTube channel] sketch with ease. Devika Vatsa [actress] can be in a Hewlett Packard advertisement while she is in a Timeliners [TVF vertical] sketch. Shibani Bedi, who works on Times Internet’s social media vertical iDiva [women’s lifestyle channel] is

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2O-N1R4x56XhndL4qqfKcw/featured>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ArreIndia/>

seen in a YouTube ad by Horlicks [hot milk drink] because she attained her screen fame on the Internet via ScoopWhoop [she was previously working with ScoopWhoop] and then a facelift from iDiva. (S. Alambayan, personal communication, January 5, 2017)



**Figure 1. Arre promoting Voot content on its Facebook page.**

Alambayan hints at the fluidity and commerciality of vloggers, actors, and stand-up comedians with social media presence in negotiating their popularity across multiple media. As Baym (2015) notes, "the ability for individuals to communicate and produce mediated content on a mass scale has led to opportunities for fame that were not available outside of the established culture industries before" (p. 4). Moreover, in my interview with actor Naveen Kasturia, who has acted in critically acclaimed Hindi feature films like *Shanghai* and *Sulemaani Keeda* as well as scripted Web series on multiple streaming platforms such as TVFPlay and Zee5, noted that he gained a lot more offers after the success of TVF Web series *Pitchers*, where he played the role of one of the four protagonists. He posited, "It changed a lot of things. I also started getting more money on commercials" (N. Kasturia, personal communication, March 24, 2018). I argue that for online content creators, social media is not a destination, but only a way to further their sustainability and commerciality within the media industries. However, the constant hustling across mediums is also a key strategy for alleviating risks that arise out of the volatilities of dealing on social

media. Though social media affordances, through algorithmic configurations, allow for creator videos to feature on social media feeds and timelines of their subscribers, the lack of transparency and unpredictable changes to the systems act as deterrents for creators as well as companies who are investing all their time, energy, and finances on these platforms to build their brands. At the same time, these platforms are increasingly fraught with all kinds of players across disciplines, mediums, and genres that are competing for attention.

In such a scenario, it is difficult for less successful as well as less economically privileged creators to attract attention and practice it as a full-time job, respectively, as was noted by Priyam Ghose, one of the emerging regional online creators from Kolkata, who specializes in creating Bengali language content. Besides producing sketches on his social media channels, Ghose holds a full-time job in the social media vertical of Bengali-specific streaming platform Hoichoi. Thus, reducing social media dependency acts as one of the ways in which online creators also build their career paths to be overall less precarious.

### ***Entrepreneurial Labor***

While interviewing online content creators in India, my research findings revealed that the “entrepreneurial” nature of the job gave online creators an opportunity to build their brand, which eventually paved the way for creating opportunities to achieve fame and money. For instance, Ankur Dobriyal, senior creative producer at ScoopWhoop, acknowledged that the company was instrumental in giving exposure to his singing talent. He argued,

I joined the ScoopWhoop team as a postproduction supervisor. One fine day, the company CEO got to know about my singing and gave me the opportunity to be a part of ScoopWhoop Café [singing cover songs] series on YouTube.<sup>15</sup> I, along with few other people, created a video with zero budget, shooting with a mobile camera and with no expectations in terms of the response of the audience, but that video got over a million hits within an hour from its upload on its channel. (A. Dobriyal, personal communication, March 26, 2018)

Having worked only in postproduction teams in small companies in the past, Dobriyal attributed his popularity on YouTube to obtaining opportunities that transcended beyond social media. Dobriyal revealed that he had “begun to get calls from various event managers and talent managers for collaborations and live performances.” (A. Dobriyal, personal communication, March 26, 2018). As online content creators continue to struggle with the social media algorithms and metrics, commonly referred to as the “black box” (see Pasquale, 2015), they are constantly adopting new creative and cost-effective measures to produce content that attracts a majority. One of the ways in which they achieve this is by employing creators who can multitask within the media creation process such as writing, acting, and editing. Nidhi Bisht, creative director, TVF, argued that TVF encouraged a multitasking environment where “the one who wrote also had the leverage to act or direct” (N. Bisht, personal communication, March 14, 2019). However, creators confessed that these frugal measures were responsible for affording them greater agency, which increased their overall involvement and passion for their work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Some argued that

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<sup>15</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbeXiLJ57\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbeXiLJ57_A)

multitasking has also improved their online visibility and chances of getting more meaningful work on subscription-based streaming platforms and Bollywood.

Dhruv Sehgal, senior content creator of Pocket Aces, a digital media company that specializes in creating content on social media, argued that “writing and acting for Dice Media [YouTube verticals] led him to receive several offers from media companies” (D. Sehgal, personal communication, April 20, 2018). Sehgal, a Delhi-based media graduate shifted to Mumbai to take up his first job as one of the first employees of Pocket Aces in 2016. Having previously worked on a documentary and short film as an associate director and actor, respectively, the founders encouraged Sehgal to explore writing. Sehgal’s sketches on YouTube, where he acted alongside Mithila Palkar, went viral; however, his biggest writing/acting success came in 2016 in the form of *Little Things*—a five-episode Web series on Pocket Aces’s YouTube vertical Dice Media, which was a sensation among Indian digital audiences, grossing an average of approximately 8 million views (average viewership of all shows).<sup>16</sup> The success of the first season led Netflix to acquire the streaming rights of *Little Things*’ sequel (Bhattacharya, 2018), offering Sehgal a chance to showcase his talent across 190 countries.

Sehgal’s popularity eventually earned him opportunities for brand endorsements, with Anirudh Pandita, the cofounder of Dice Media, even acknowledging that Sehgal had “received an offer for a feature film” (A. Pandita, personal communication, March 14, 2018). This is not unsurprising, given that Sehgal’s costar in *Little Things*, Mithila Palkar, post *Little Things*, has appeared in one Marathi-language feature film in 2017, *Muramba*, Bollywood film *Karwaan*, with the latest being Netflix feature film *Chopsticks* (Sharma, 2019). The “multitasking” labor approach of these media companies not only make their content cost-effective but also rewards the investment in energy and time of employees. The greater degree of dependence on talent among digital media companies and within the overall media industries helps them overcome the venture labor critique that Neff (2012) offers in her study of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs.

### Conclusion

In concluding, to “deal with” precarious creativity within these contexts is to enable equality in opportunity and foster freedom of expression for creators looking to pursue a career in media, while also acknowledging that it does not address questions about safe and secure working conditions. It also means challenging existing power structures within media industries and their gatekeeping practices, while accepting the limitations of digital media in offering an ever-inclusive space for progressive cultural politics (Mehta, 2019a). Precarious creativity, then, assumes ambivalence, whereby it offers grounds for linguistic and cultural diversity (Mehta, 2019b), but also denies those who do not conform to their capitalistic logics.

The purpose of this article is not to valorize the platform economy or its affordances. Rather, it is an attempt to highlight the meaningful ways in which distinct kinds of online creators derive value on social media through their sense making as they deal with precarious creativity. Online content creators, both as individuals and companies, can generate value for themselves on social media and use it as currency to negotiate across

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<sup>16</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YoFoKZ9HgfQ&list=PL4x7Of-X4Xhhdfqf9FkR9r1sPnfy8Bd\\_n&index=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YoFoKZ9HgfQ&list=PL4x7Of-X4Xhhdfqf9FkR9r1sPnfy8Bd_n&index=1s)

Indian media industries. The creators' success on social media eventually propels the gatekeepers of traditional media and close-ended platforms to reward them with opportunities for creative expression and monetary compensation. Some online content creators are also organizing themselves to function as digital entertainment companies, professionalizing in creating diverse kinds of content for Internet audiences. These companies have been able to secure funding from venture capitalists by highlighting their value propositions.

Because the economic and social transactions within traditional media are unreachable despite offering value propositions, social media creates a perception of a more equitable site for creating content as well as reaching the audience. The fact that they do not have to deal with gatekeepers before creation or create content as per their perception also propagates a sense that the inequities of traditional media are dealt with or lessened to a certain extent by creating on, and not for, platforms. This belief is strengthened by working on more individualistic motives entrenched within the capitalist logic. Also, concerns about the sustainability of creators performing well on social media can only be assessed by conducting a longitudinal study of their careers within media circuits. Future research must also compare the labor practices among the television, film, and digital media to rightfully assess the medium-specific benefits that the creators derive from working in each of these mediums.

At the same time, it is important to remember that social media platforms, in attending to the ideology of a "free marketplace," end up producing the same concerns about labor productivity and precarity as is involved in traditional media (Herman & McChesney, 2003). The advent of technology propagates capitalist ideologies that only benefit select creators and rationalize "inegalitarian" relationships based on popularity, consistency, and volatile algorithmic recommendations that benefit one content or creator over another.

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