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"We're All Told Not to Put Our Eggs in One Basket": Uncertainty, Precarity and Cross-Platform Labor in the Online Video Influencer Industry

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There has been a recent proliferation of scholarly interest in the impacts of platformization on cultural industries and labor. This article draws on a longitudinal ethnographic study of the London- and Los Angeles-based influencer community industries (2017–2022) to consider the ways in which the *platformized creative worker* marks an intensification of the neoliberal worker subject as theorized in more traditional cultural industries. I argue that this industry marks an escalation of conditions of precarity; this research found that the working lives of most content creators are fraught with stress and burnout, and smaller creators in particular are subject to *algorithmic discrimination* in an industry where visibility is key to success. Contrary to highly celebratory discourses that position online content creation as more open and meritocratic than traditional cultural industries, this is an advertising-driven industry that propels the most profitable creators into the spotlight, resulting in the closing down of mobility. I conclude by considering the opportunities and challenges for reducing this widespread precarity via collective action and regulation.

Keywords: platformized creative labor, cultural industries, YouTube, online video, social media entertainment, content creators, influencers

There has been a recent proliferation of scholarly interest in the impact of platformization on cultural industries and labor. In this article, I contribute to this growing body of literature by considering the ways in which the *platformized creative worker* marks an intensification of the neoliberal worker subject as theorized in more traditional cultural industries, and concurrently an escalation of conditions of precarity.

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This article draws on a longitudinal ethnographic study of the London- and L.A.-based influencer industries (2017–2022) to address the ways in which certain aspects of platformization define the contours of work for entrepreneurial content creators in this industry. The analysis is divided into three key aspects of content creator labor: the necessity to diversify platforms and income streams, the *algorithmic discrimination* that smaller creators face in this hierarchical industry, and the impact that the primacy of metrics has on creators' self-worth. More broadly, I am interested in understanding the labor conditions that creative workers face in emerging platformized environments, taking the influencer industry as an emblematic example of a platformized cultural industry.

Theorizing the Platformized Creative Worker

As many researchers have identified, the proliferation of platforms and their increasing centrality in cultural industries has profound implications for the nature of creative labor. Nieborg and Poell (2018) define the platformization of cultural industries as "the penetration of economic and infrastructural extensions of online platforms into the web, affecting the production, distribution, and circulation of cultural content," impelling cultural producers to "develop publishing strategies that are aligned with the business models of platforms" (p. 8). Broadening their inquiry beyond political-economic dimensions, in the introduction to their comprehensive two-part special issue on the "Platformization of Cultural Production" in *Social Media + Society*, editors Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg (2019) argue that platforms are "reconfiguring the production, distribution, and monetization of cultural content in staggering and complex ways," highlighting that platformization has complex ramifications at both the institutional level and in the everyday cultural practices of producers and consumers, diverse in their cultural, geographic, and sectoral-industrial contexts (p. 1).

All cultural industries have had to adapt to the dominance of platformization to a greater or lesser extent; in recent years research has been conducted into the platformization of journalism (Christin, 2020), music (Baym, 2018; Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Hesmondhalgh, Jones, & Rauh, 2019), gaming (Gray, 2020; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019; Taylor, 2018), and publishing (Tomasena, 2019), among others. Every cultural industry has its specificities, and accordingly, the experiences of different types of creative workers will diverge significantly in how they navigate the challenges and opportunities that platform environments present. But as Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg (2019) put it, "such diversity does not belie their productive points of overlap which, together, reveal the potential for a systematic examination of the platform practices of the cultural industries" (p. 6).

As an ethnographer, I am interested in the pursuit of knowledge from the ground up; it is through immersion in the granular detail of the influencer industry, in seeing people interact, and hearing them describe their experiences that I seek a comprehensive understanding of this cultural context. However, in-depth knowledge of one industry can provide an excellent jumping-off point for thinking about the wider context within which that industry sits. In this article, I draw out some of the patterned ways in which the platformized nature of the influencer industry provides both openings and foreclosures for specific kinds of participation, in the hopes that it may contribute to the cross-industry conversation around the nature and conditions of platformized creative work more broadly. In this way, I attempt to avoid the siloing of

knowledge that so often occurs in academia when research does not make its way across boundaries of disciplines, concepts, theories, and objects of study.

Much like the importance of identifying similarities across different industries, it is crucial to recognize the similarities between platformized creative work and that which came prior. As Hesmondhalgh (2002/2019) argues, an obsession with the newness and novelty of digital innovations can lead to false claims that cultural production has been transformed "beyond recognition" (p. 6). I support his call for a more balanced assessment, one that is grounded in "a longer-term historical perspective than many of the celebrations of a new digital age" (p. 6), recognizing noteworthy changes but also the significant continuities in cultural industries over time. Thus, I draw on the rich research conducted on the neoliberalisation of creative labor across various preplatformized industries as a theoretical anchor with which to think laterally about the currently unfolding formation of the platformized creative worker.

Shifting patterns of employment in the cultural industries away from stable structures, and the emergence of the *neoliberal worker subject*—entrepreneurial, flexible, self-directed, always available to work—have been topics of much academic scrutiny since the 1990s (Duffy, 2017; Gill, 2010; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh, 2002/2019; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; McRobbie, 1998, 2002, 2016; Ross, 2003; Schlesinger, 2016). Studies of this type of labor have highlighted several common features, such as:

> A preponderance of temporary, intermittent and precarious jobs; long hours and bulimic patterns of working; the collapse or erasure of the boundaries between work and play; poor pay; high levels of mobility; passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative laborer; an attitudinal mindset that is a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism; informal work environments and distinctive forms of sociality; and profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and 'keeping up' in rapidly changing fields. (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 20)

Precarity and uncertainty are central features of this research on creative labor. The lack of stable employment, coupled with the demise of collective action organizations, results in a situation where creative workers are tasked with "managing the self in conditions of radical uncertainty" (Gill, 2010, p. 290). Following Han (2018), I define *precarity* (in the context of work) broadly as "the predicament of those who live at the juncture of unstable contract labor and a loss of state provisioning" (p. 332). Gill and Pratt (2008) outline how cultural workers "negotiating short-term, insecure, poorly paid, precarious work in conditions of structural uncertainty" (p. 29) have been described as emblematic of the new *precariat*, "a neologism that brings together the meanings of precariousness and proletariat to signify both an experience of exploitation and a (potential) new political subjectivity" (p. 4). In line with this definition, McRobbie (2016) argues that a "labor reform by stealth" has been happening in the United Kingdom's cultural industries since the promotion of the creative economy during the times of the New Labour government starting in 1997, wherein "the new urban middle class is being desocialized, and cut off from its earlier association with municipal socialism, public-mindedness and civic consciousness; instead it is persuaded to think and act only on its own behalf" (p. 60). Consequently, experiences of precarity in these fields are highly ambivalent. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) found that cultural workers "seem torn over the precariousness of their work," bemoaning the anxiety and stress caused, but in many cases seeing it as a necessary evil coupled

with certain perks. One music journalist who they interviewed describes his working conditions as involving freedom, but "a very complicated version of freedom" (p. 13). Similarly, Banks (2007) argues that the allure of autonomy "is sufficiently powerful to override any misgivings, constraints or disadvantages that might emerge in the everyday reproduction of this highly competitive and uncertain domain" (p. 55).

While all the research outlined above continues to accurately describe creative labor, the introduction of platformized environments has led to an intensification of these neoliberal logics, and concurrently, I argue, an escalation of conditions of precarity. Some noteworthy commonalities across platformized cultural industries include: extreme levels of datafication whereby analytics and metrics becoming increasingly central to success (Marwick, 2013), resulting in the *popularity principle*, "an ideology that values hierarchy, competition, and a winner-takes-all mindset" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 21); the primacy of algorithmic recommendation and the need for cultural producers "to be visible for platform-specific contexts" (Bishop, 2019, p. 2591); complex, fragmented working environments involving multiple platforms (Scolere, Pruchniewska, & Duffy, 2018), each with distinct sociotechnological arrangements and challenges; increasingly individualistic and risky labor conditions in unstable platform environments (Duffy, Poell, & Nieborg, 2019, p. 4), paired with fewer legal protections and further challenges to collective action (Niebler & Kern, 2020); and a necessity for cultural workers to align their self-brands with those of commercial platforms, shaped most significantly by the interests and values of advertisers, leading to an escalation of structural inequalities (Brock, 2011, 2020; Noble, 2018; Noble & Tynes, 2016).

It is within this context that I turn to my case study of the online video influencer industry to explore the lived experiences of content creators working in what is arguably the most emblematic example of a platformized cultural industry and certainly one of the most precarious, unformalized and unregulated as it is.

Social Media Content Creators: A Case Study of Platformized Creative Work

Over the past decade, we have seen the rise of a new cross-platform cultural industry, dubbed by Cunningham and Craig (2019) as *social media entertainment*. What began in 2005 as pockets of amateur creators on YouTube has grown into a mature infrastructure of diverse and competing platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, Patreon, Facebook, and Twitch,[2] that combine online video and social networking affordances with opportunities for industrious self-appointed *content creators* or *influencers*[3] to generate revenue. They are jack-of-all-trades entrepreneurs within a highly competitive industry, simultaneously videographers, editors, photographers, on-screen talent, brand ambassadors, merchandise producers,

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[2] It is important to note that I am talking about the Euro-American context rather than, for example, the Chinese context, which has a distinct platform environment and *wanghong* economy. Nonetheless, the broader argument made in this article around the precarity of platformized creative work is relevant across geographical and cultural boundaries.

[3] There are nuances and disagreements around these terms in both academia and popular culture. I use "content creator" as a catch-all term, while "influencer" describes a particular subset of high-profile creators (Abidin, 2015), usually associated with lifestyle-related genres.

marketers, and PR reps—or at least they are until they get big enough to hire a team and delegate some of the labor.

The global influencer marketing industry has grown exponentially from $1.7 billion in 2016 to $6.6 billion in 2019, with an anticipated increase to $9.7 billion in 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). As the second-most popular website in the world, with 1.9 billion logged-in users each month, 500 hours of content uploaded every minute, and over 1 billion hours of content watched daily, YouTube holds an important position in the social media landscape, not only as a destination for viewer entertainment but also for freelancing creatives seeking to build careers as social media personalities (YouTube, 2019). According to Forbes, the top-10, highest-paid YouTube stars of 2019 earned an incredible combined $162 million (Berg, 2019). The spectacular success stories that are so visible on platforms and in journalistic representations of influencers add to the allure, and this new industry has had a particularly profound impact on the ambitions of young viewers; the *Drawing the Future* report based on a survey of over 20,000 British primary school children found that *social media and gaming* is the fourth-most popular career aspiration among 7–11 year olds in the United Kingdom, and that "for more and more children and young people online celebrities and YouTube gaming vloggers have taken the place of TV and movie stars" (Chambers, Rehill, Kashefpakdel, & Percy, 2018, p. 19).

Social media content creators are an important case study for understanding the lived experiences of platformized creative workers. While most cultural industries existed before the Internet, the influencer industry is a rare example of one that grew out of it. It is an industry that is inextricable—socioculturally, economically, and institutionally—from the multiplatform environment on which it is based. There is a pervasive myth extolled by industry insiders and in popular media representations, aligned with technoutopian discourses, that social media content creation is *far more open and egalitarian* than more-established cultural industries, such as film and television, publishing, theatre, design, and fashion. Unconfronted with the usual gatekeepers on their way up the ladder determining their suitability for opportunities (line managers, commissioning editors, executive producers, directors, and so on), it is championed in the industry that *talent will meritocratically rise to the top.* Therefore, previously marginalized groups such as BIPOC, LGBTQ+, female, disabled, working class, and others are given an equal platform to produce self-representations and earn money in ways not afforded in more traditional cultural industries. Additionally, it is claimed that social media content creators have unprecedented *freedoms* as creative workers; they can work when they want and however much they want, create whatever they want, accept or reject brand deals and other income-generating offers at will, and can reach giddy heights of fame, success, and wealth, governed only by their ability to attract an audience. Armed with only gumption, a smartphone, and an entrepreneurial spirit, *anyone can make it* as a social media content creator (Duffy, 2017), and they will have fun doing it. Like most cultural myths, there are grains of truth in the above claims, but the more time I spent in the field talking to content creators, the clearer it became that these depictions are fundamentally flawed. It is these divergences that I explore further in this article.

Despite the many people trying to break into this industry, research into the experiences of small and aspiring entrepreneurial content creators is sparse. The emphasis in influencer research on successful full-time creators, as opposed to most, who are struggling to gain traction and income, fails to reflect the profoundly precarious and uncertain nature of work that most content creators face. There is a deep

inequality of viewership on YouTube, which intersects with issues of race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality in complex ways (Bishop, 2018; Glatt, forthcoming; Glatt & Banet-Weiser, 2018), and highly visible creators make up a tiny minority of the whole, with 85% of all views going to only 3% of channels (Bärtl, 2018, p. 16). As being a content creator has grown into a viable career for some, and an aspiration for many more, it has become pressing to understand the lived realities of those working in this industry from top to bottom, not only the privileged few who have *made it*.

Methodology

This research is ethnographically grounded. The data presented is part of an ongoing five-year multisited transatlantic London- and L.A.-based research project (2017–2022), involving several complementary methodologies: (1) offline participant observation at key industry events (VidCon London & United States, Summer in the City), as well as formal and informal content creator meet-ups and events, (2) online participant observation of content creator/influencer culture across a wide range of social media platforms (YouTube, TikTok, Twitch, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, personal blogs, and so on), (3) In-depth semistructured interviews with 30 London-based content creators and 1 social media marketing executive, and (4) Autoethnographic research in the form of becoming a YouTube creator myself, with the aim of gaining firsthand experiential insights into the nature of content creator labor.

My research has encompassed as full a spectrum of entrepreneurial creators as I could muster, from attending London Small YouTubers meetings, a community organization for small creators (< 20,000 subscribers) carrying out seemingly endless free *aspirational labor*, diligently approaching social media content creation as an investment in a future self that will hopefully be able to "do what they love" for a living (Duffy, 2017, p. x), to "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 1998) in various green rooms, backstage spaces and highly secured hotel bars at major industry events, in which elite A-list influencers with multiple millions of fans mingle with one another and prominent industry professionals. It is important to highlight that this is primarily an ethnography of the London-based influencer industry, but I made the decision to attend VidCon US once a year for three consecutive years (2018–2020) for two main reasons. First, a good number of U.K.-based content creators attend VidCon US and there is a strong overlap between these two *community-industries*.[4] Second, L.A. is the epicenter of the Euro-American online video industry, and VidCon US is the world's largest online video convention (with 75,000 attendees in 2019), thus it offers a unique field site for understanding the highly formalized and commercialized end of the industry.

Gaining access to elite creators and exclusive events was challenging, as many other researchers of influencer cultures have found, so I think it worthwhile to share some insights. I attribute my success in this regard to four main factors: (1) maintaining a constant presence at events and gatherings over several years, (2) demonstrating my positionality as a long-term YouTube culture enthusiast and a member of the viewer community, (3) expressing an understanding for the struggles of aspiring and professional creators

[4] I adopt the term *community-industry* from O'Neill (2018) to describe the ambivalent persistence of the language of "community" in a decidedly commercial-industrial context (p. 3). In line with findings of previous cultural industries research, in the influencer industry the boundaries of work and play, and of community and industry are profoundly collapsed.

and taking their labor seriously as such, and (4) explicitly aligning myself with creators through my autoethnography, rather than with industry professionals or fans. In short, immersing myself fully in the anthropological sensibility of long-term fieldwork.

Informed by a feminist approach, I tried to make interviews friendly, informal, and collaborative and to foster a sense of equality between researcher and participant. They took place wherever the interviewee decided they felt most comfortable, most commonly at cafes or pubs but also at their workplace, my university, and over Skype when necessary. Interviews were structured loosely into six overarching themes but with a lot of freedom to diverge from these themes depending on the personal experiences and interests of the interviewee: personal history, money and career, cross-platform cultures, technological concerns (metrics, analytics, algorithms, and so on), audience relationships, and the future. I gave interviewees as much time as they wanted to speak, practicing attentiveness to their energy levels and enthusiasm, and accordingly, interviews ranged between 1 and 3.5 hours. With the ambitious goal of gaining a holistic picture of the London content creator community-industry, interviewees represented a broad range of identity categories (in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class, and ability), and worked across various prominent and niche genres, including lifestyle, beauty, gaming, BookTube, educational (sex, science, and ethnomusicology), video essayist (philosophy and cultural studies), animation, LGBTQ+ and feminism, political commentary, reviews (film and tech), travel, trending vlog challenges and tags, comedy, acting tutorials, and short scripted films. The smallest creator I interviewed had a single solitary subscriber (me!), and the largest had 2.2 million.

Following the characteristic design of ethnographic research, my analysis did not begin once fieldwork had ended, but rather the fieldwork itself was intimately intertwined with the practice of thematic analysis. Themes emerged out of the fieldwork and interview data and were adjusted and reformulated as the project progressed. Thus, data collection, organization, and analysis were dialectically linked, each informing the other aspects in an ongoing process of refinement, observing the characteristic *funnel structure* of ethnographic research that becomes increasingly focused as a project goes on (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, pp. 158–160). This research is informed by a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), meaning that I drew my conceptual framework and theoretical contributions from observations in the field (my data), rather than using "theory generated by logical deduction from *a priori* assumptions" (p. 30). I am more interested in understanding patterns in the experiential testimonies of my participants than in formulating abstract grand theories about platformized industries or objective claims about how technologies work (see Bucher's 2017 work on *algorithmic imaginaries* for a similar sensibility).

Having laid out the theoretical and methodological context for this study, I now move into the three empirical analysis sections of this article, starting with the necessity for creators to diversify platforms and income streams.

"We're Told Not to Put All Our Eggs in One Basket": Diversifying Platforms and Income Streams

I met 28-year-old Hannah Witton, who makes social media content about sex education and disability, for an interview in a café in North London. When I asked her the simple question "what platforms do you use for your work?" during our interview in June 2019, she told me:

> I use YouTube for my main videos, Instagram, Twitter, those are the main platforms. I used to have a Snapchat and Tumblr. Tumblr was the first to go because it wasn't making me any money. I loved it but I found that it wasn't a priority to keep up with it and one day I was just like why am I bothering? Basically, as soon as Instagram brought out Stories I tried doing both and then I was like no never mind, goodbye Snapchat! I have my own website, which I occasionally write blogs on. I do have a Facebook page mainly so I could make my Instagram account a business account because you have to connect it to your page. My podcast also has a Twitter and Instagram. I started using Facebook recently to create a community for my book the Hormone Diaries. I wanted to have a place where other people could post stuff and actually a Facebook group was the best option for that. I have a private Discord community for Patrons. What else do I use? I have a newsletter on MailChimp. And I have Patreon, does that count as a platform?

As her comically lengthy but typical response exemplifies, the received wisdom in the online video industry is that content creators are required to diversify their labor and income streams across many platforms and projects if they hope to build sustainable audiences and careers; in essence, they are spread-betting their labor to mitigate risk in a rapidly changing and unstable context. Entrepreneurial creators understand themselves as cross-platform, multimedia brands, simultaneously dependent on and independent from the platforms that they work across. In the run up to VidCon's first London event in February 2019, a message from General Manager Jim Louderback on their website read:

> Uncovering the next big thing can propel your business forward, while spending too much time on a dying platform can slow your progress. . . . The media world is changing rapidly; fortunes are being made and lost every month. (Louderback, 2019)

This sort of alarmist-cum-opportunistic rhetoric abounds in the online video industry, leading to a relentless sense unease among content creators. They are constantly trying to figure out where best to spend their time and energy in an attempt to "keep up" (Gill & Pratt, 2008), creating what Scolere and colleagues (2018) have termed *platform-specific self-brands* (p. 1), a form of self-branding "undertaken by individuals to garner attention, reputation, and potentially, profit" (Hearn, 2010, p. 427) that is based on varied platform imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) and affordances.

During the *How to break out on TikTok* panel at VidCon London 2019, one enthusiastic panelist exclaimed,

> Obviously we're all told not to put all our eggs in one basket in terms of platform, but I'm putting all my eggs into TikTok this year. If it fails it will be no eggs for me, but if it does pay off I'll be eating a huge omelet!

Not putting all your eggs in one basket has become a pervasive metaphor in the industry, with creators advised to avoid becoming too heavily dependent on any one platform or revenue stream in case it dries up. At a fundamental level, there is a deep-seated anxiety in the creator community that a platform that appears to be a pillar of the social media ecology can disappear overnight, as was the case when the

extremely popular Vine closed down in October 2016. Many creators had built their whole careers on Vine and struggled to relocate their audiences and adapt their content to new platforms, halting their livelihoods in their tracks. As one creator put it to me bluntly at a London Small YouTubers meeting in January 2019, "You have to be across all platforms because what if one closes down? That's your job." This exemplifies the lack of accountability and responsibility that platforms show toward the creators that generate profit for them. Creators are merely *hosted* by platforms, and thus do not enjoy any of the labor rights of an employee. Incentivized by this platform uncertainty, many content creators have highly regimented cross-platform schedules for their content output. At a VidCon London 2019 panel, one TikTok star with 13 million+ followers said that she uploads to both Instagram and TikTok every day and to her YouTube channel once a week, always on the same day. These posts are supported by close scrutiny of her analytics, which she checks "10 times a day," altering her content according to her audience demographics and what is performing well that week.

As a veteran content creator of over 10 years (full time since 2015), 648k subscribers across her two YouTube channels, 199k followers on Instagram, and 131k followers on Twitter, 616 monthly Patreon supporters (or patrons), an assistant, an editor, a manager and publisher, her own podcast *Doing It!*, two books under her belt, and respect from her peers and other professionals (as of April 2020), Hannah Witton is by all accounts an exemplar of success in the online video industry. However, as Bishop (2018) observes, even highly successful creators "are not safe from algorithmically induced platform invisibility" (p. 71). Like many of the creators I met during fieldwork, Hannah worried a great deal about her fluctuating visibility across platforms and the uncertain future stability of her income:

> I know that my YouTube channel isn't doing as well as it used to. It's still growing but the growth isn't as much as it was in 2016/2017. So I'm like OK I need a plan B, not to completely stop doing YouTube, but some people just keep beating a dead horse and then they're like "Why isn't my channel doing so well?" and then they're like "Shit, I've got no money, what am I going to do now?!" I don't want to be in that position. I want to be figuring it out. Maybe my channel does continue to grow and that's fine, but having all my eggs in one basket, I don't like that. It's precarious.

At the time of our interview, most of Hannah's income came from brand collaborations, as is the case for most professional content creators, with the remainder made up of a combination of AdSense revenue, affiliate links, Patreon, book sales, and speaking gigs. Brands determine how much they will pay based on a creator's visibility metrics, which is why Hannah was worried about the slump in her YouTube growth. As Niebler and Kern (2020) put it, "the main precondition for a creator's success is their visibility on the platform—if creators are shown often on YouTube's recommendation sidebar, they can increase revenue chances, if they are shown less, they lose income" (p. 3). She felt nervous about such a large proportion of her income being tied directly to something "as fickle as metric success" on a platform where creators often suddenly become *algorithmically challenged*, as she put it, if their content stops being recommended to viewers.

To gain some respite from the stresses of algorithmically dependent income, Hannah's solution was to build up her community on the crowdfunding platform Patreon, because it "offers a form of income that

isn't algorithm dependent, it is community dependent. Supporters can be more understanding if you want to upload less frequently or need to take a break." At face value, depending on a compassionate human community for income rather than an unforgiving algorithmic recommendation system seems to be an ideal solution. However, the crowdfunding model comes with its own unique set of challenges, such as the increased pressure on creators to perform the *relational labor* (Baym, 2018) required to nurture an invested audience-community, one that is willing to support them financially. Creators are encouraged to commodify their personalities, lives, and tastes, cultivating *authentic* self-brands, appealing on-screen personas, and intimacy with audiences, marking a profound collapse of the boundaries between work and play (Abidin, 2015; Bishop, 2018; Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Duffy, 2017; Glatt, 2017). Fostering these parasocial audience relationships can take its toll; creators variously told me that it made them feel exposed, exploitative, and answerable to entitled audiences who felt that they deserved to have a say in the creator's life choices.

Back in 2002, writing about the acceleration in the nature and pace of work in the United Kingdom's culture industries, McRobbie (2002) argued that those working in the cultural sector had to "find new ways of 'working' the new cultural economy, which increasingly means holding down three or even four 'projects' at once" (p. 519). Doing three or four projects at once seems relatively modest when compared with the current average workload of an online content creator, for whom a carefully curated combination of AdSense revenue, brand collaborations, merchandise and books sales, live shows, speaking appearances, and crowdfunding, supported by visibility and popularity across a wide range of unpredictable platforms, are all seen as part of a well-rounded career.

"YouTube Doesn't Care About Small Creators": (In)visibility and Hierarchy in the Influencer Industry

> It's coming toward the end of SitC 2019 at ExCel London, the UK's biggest community-oriented online video conference. I file into a room along with an excitable crowd for the popular "Smaller Creators" panel, a yearly highlight of the conference for many attendees. The audience is loud and jovial, and I recognize many of them from London Small YouTubers meetings and other events. To begin, the moderator asks the panel a provocative question: "As a small creator who is being screwed over by YouTube, how can you get the company to listen to your concerns?" He is referring to the ongoing issues that small creators are facing with visibility and monetization on the platform, and the lack of pathways to communicate grievances directly with YouTube. One panelist responds contemptuously, "YouTube doesn't care about small creators." This is met with a knowing and appreciative cheer from the audience. He continues, "They can't handle the amount of content being uploaded and so they've closed off the gates for small creators. No one small is getting recommended by The Algorithm. The only way to grow is to be pulled up by bigger creators."

As the above field notes from Summer in the City (SitC) in August 2019 suggest, fighting for success on overcrowded platforms, small and marginalized creators are subject to *algorithmic discrimination*, which I define as a process whereby certain content, identities, and positionalities within the

platform economy are deprioritized from recommendation, in an industry where visibility is key to success. In an industry organized by algorithmic visibility, every challenge that full-time professional content creators face is exponentially exacerbated in the lives of small creators. As the above fieldnotes describe, YouTube's infamous algorithmic recommendation system—a.k.a., "the Algorithm," an anthropomorphized omnipotent and pernicious character in the imaginaries of content creators (Glatt, forthcoming)—is heavily stacked toward promoting content from already-popular creators. Data shows that channels at the top end of the platform are growing at a disproportionate rate. In 2019, the number of YouTube channels with more than 1 million subscribers grew by 65% (to 16,000), and channels featuring between 10 and 100 thousand subscribers grew by 70% (to 950,000), while small channels with 100–1000 subscribers stayed the same, at a whopping 13 million (Funk, 2020). In other words, it became harder algorithmically to pass the crucial 1,000 subscriber milestone, the minimum requirement to join YouTube Partner Program and start earning AdSense revenue on videos, along with 4,000 hours of watch time in the past 12 months.

Because of this, small creators are especially pressured to employ sophisticated techniques to grow their visibility within constantly changing algorithmic contexts, such as strategically timing posts to coincide with spikes in platform usage (Duffy, 2017, p. x), using eye-catching titles and thumbnails, producing exciting modifications of existing popular video trends/genres, finding a narrow content niche favored by the algorithm, utilizing effective metadata keywords for video SEO, promoting their content across platforms, focusing their energies on less competitive platforms, and filming "collabs" with other content creators. Most importantly, it is common knowledge in the industry that the algorithm preferences YouTube channels with regular uploads; posting at least one video a week is seen as the bare minimum requirement to gain any traction. The pressures of the algorithm have come to a head in the past couple of years, with *burnout* being one of the most discussed issues in the YouTube creator community and broader influencer industry (Stokel-Walker, 2018). During my fieldwork, I witnessed a proliferation of burnout-related panels at industry events, such as *Beating the grind without losing your mind* at VidCon US (Lo, 2019), in which creators talked about the never-ending churn of content production and the toll it was taking on their creativity and mental health.

This slow-and-painful uphill battle for small creators means that most are excluded from monetizing opportunities such as AdSense revenue, brand collaborations, and crowdfunding for a protracted period of time, if indeed they ever make it to that point. I spoke to many smaller creators in full-time employment who diligently spent all of their evenings and weekends producing and promoting their social media content in the hopes that one day they would be able to quit their day jobs and make the transition to professional content creation. Some had been performing this *aspirational labor* (Duffy, 2017) for many years, waiting for their big break with little success, competing on platforms with full-time independent creators and production companies who have teams of people working for them and the time and resources to pump out the much-higher quantity and quality of content required for algorithmic visibility. This is a compounding factor as to why traditional inequalities across intersections of race, class and gender persist, and indeed why the barriers to entry remain "staggeringly high" (p. 223) in social media work. As is the case in other tech and cultural industries, the social media producers most likely to rise to the top hail from the privilege: they tend to be white, educated, and possess family connections and financial support.

The Metrification of Self-Worth

I noticed throughout the weekend at VidCon US, the world's largest online video convention, that the more successful creators tended to close ranks in the company of new and unknown people. While an awareness of clout is undoubtedly true in all cultural industries, it is especially tangible in social media, where popularity metrics are an absolutely integral and public aspect of content creators' success. The pervasive discourse, at times veiled and at times explicit, is that popularity, fame, and visibility are valued above other concerns. Or put another way, that these aims have become an end in themselves, to the point where "visibility is all there is" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 18). All of this made for an uncomfortable social situation at the convention. I felt as though there was an unyielding layer of quantified hierarchy enveloping the event, exacerbated by the division of physical space in terms of badge color (from community, creator and industry, through to featured creator and the highly coveted full access pass); an awareness of the subscriber and view counts of creators, and the influence of industry professionals, permeated every interaction.

The above fieldnotes were written in June 2018 during my first trip to California for the annual VidCon US conference, eight months into fieldwork. It was a thoroughly disheartening experience, fraught with access issues, loneliness, and a general feeling of pessimism over the current state of online video and YouTube in particular as a platform that I had held close to my heart since 2006, when I first became immersed the world of its communities of hobbyist content creators. The extreme levels of hierarchy and division, marked by the flocking of industry and fan attention to the most famous and elite creators, left me with a lasting appreciation for the struggles of small and unknown creators currently trying to break into this intensely competitive industry. This fieldwork trip was the first time that it became blindingly clear to me quite how far the industry has come from its amateur early days before the career aspiration of *influencer* even existed, and the algorithm, AdSense, and brand deals were unheard of.

In an industry where "to be visible . . . is to be rendered valuable" (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 4996), content creators are engaged in a process of "self-knowledge through numbers" (Lupton, 2016, p. 3), involving acute self-scrutiny according to the barrage of audience analytics and popularity metrics available to them. Many interviewees reflected that their mood and sense of self-worth is heavily impacted by their metric success. For example, Steve, who makes review videos about offbeat animations, told me the following during our interview in August 2019:

> You'll see your videos are dwindling on YouTube Studio with big red numbers, and it's like "Viewership is down! Watch time is down! You're doing terrible! Got to get those numbers up!" I hate looking at YouTube because of it . . . Like here's the amount of views you had in the last 48 hours, here's the amount of views you had in the last hour or so. Even if you make a viral video, like one of my videos got a million views, and I was like great! But then every video after that was doing worse than the last one and YouTube Studio was like "Ooh your viewership is dropping." It really does make me depressed seeing numbers constantly.

As this quote reflects, even the experience of having a viral video, seen by many as the epitome of success, is a hollow victory marred by the subsequent dwindling of viewership. As creator Ahsante commented on one of my autoethnographic vlogs, in which I described feeling down about how hardly anyone was watching my YouTube videos, "That 'nobody's watching' feeling doesn't go away even when you gain more subs—your benchmark for how many views a video 'should' get only increases (and I've heard it from creators much larger than myself as well)" (Glatt, 2018). The quest for visibility is never fulfilled, the promise of having "made it" always deferred, with the only satisfactory option being a constant state of growth.

Discussion: Unimaginable Futures and the Failures of Meritocracy

In this article, I have put forth an argument that the *platformized creative worker* marks an intensification of the neoliberal worker subject as theorized in more traditional cultural industries, and concurrently an escalation of conditions of precarity. Throughout my research I have found that the working lives of the majority of content creators are fraught with stress, uncertainty, and burnout. As one former full-time creator with 3 million+ subscribers put it succinctly at a VidCon London 2019: "I don't make online content full-time anymore because I didn't make enough money, it was too stressful, and it killed my creativity." This is a fast-paced, unstable, and constantly changing industry, which gives rise to a profound "inability of workers to imagine . . . their futures" (Gill, 2010, p. 253). The responsibility for managing precarity sits squarely on the shoulders of individual creators, who are tasked with keeping up with a frenetic pace of content output and spreading their labor across many platforms to mitigate the risk of failure.

Contrary to the highly celebratory myths of openness and egalitarianism I introduced earlier in this article, in this advertising-driven industry, we see the closing down rather than the opening up of social mobility. It is presumed that "talent" will meritocratically shine through and rise to the top but, as Littler (2013) argues, "unrealised talent is . . . both the necessary and structural condition of its existence" (p. 54). This is a competitive, linear, and hierarchical system, in which certain identities, expressions, and types of content are propelled into the spotlight while others are cast into the shadows of obscurity, mapping onto well-worn inequalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Bishop, 2018; Duffy, 2017; Duguay, 2019; Glatt & Banet-Weiser, 2018). Creators who are the most profitable to platforms become the most visible—those who do not disrupt the neoliberal status quo: white, male, middle class, heteronormative, brand friendly. Content creators who do not fit these narrow demographics face increased precarity with multiple obstacles to success, spanning across the sociocultural, technological, and commercial realms of their work, supporting André Brock's (2011) claim that "the Western Internet, as a social structure, represents and maintains White, masculine, bourgeois, heterosexual and Christian culture through its content" (p. 1088).

Conclusions: Possibilities for Collective Action and Regulation

I have presented a fairly doom-and-gloom picture of the working conditions of content creators in the nascent influencer industry, but what can be done to improve their situation? With contracts and brand rates kept as closely guarded secrets and a widespread celebration of the *entrepreneurial self-starter*, this industry appears to be the logical conclusion of McRobbie's (2016) "labor reform by stealth" (p. 59), without a sense of civic consciousness or collectivism. But there are rumblings that things may be changing, with

several grassroots organizations rising to the challenge of advocating on behalf of and formalizing labor conditions for content creators.

In 2019, the YouTubers Union in Germany joined forces with IG Metall, Europe's largest industrial union, to launch the FairTube campaign to improve communication, fairness, and transparency for creators, an organization that I acted as a consultant for. More recently, in June 2020, the Creator Union was launched in the United Kingdom and the American Influencer Council in the United States. Perhaps the most successful attempt so far has been the Internet Creators Guild (ICG), founded in 2016 by online royalty Hank Green, who also founded VidCon. With several high-profile content creators and industry professionals on its board, the ICG crucially had the ear of YouTube. As their executive director, Anthony D'Angelo told me in an interview in June 2018 that the guild would host creator roundtables at the YouTube Space in Los Angeles, where they would take a dozen or so creators to "speak their minds" with the platform.

Nonetheless, the ICG closed down in 2019 because of several issues, including an unsustainable financial model and a lack of support from elite full-time creators with "little incentive to collectively look after the little guys" (Stokel-Walker, 2019, para. 6). In this industry, the withdrawal of labor is also an ineffective bargaining tool, with so many other content creators waiting in the wings to fill the gaps, and platforms are resistant to efforts to organize creator labor. Despite the backing of IG Metall, YouTube still does not recognize the YouTubers Union. Quoted in *The Guardian*, founder Jörg Sprave explained that employment law needs to change to recognize the new category of workers who earn income from, but are not employed by, these tech giant platforms, citing California's Assembly bill 5 (AB5) as an example, which extended employee status to gig workers such as Uber drivers in 2019 (Tait, 2020). However, Niebler and Kern (2020) argue that the combination of *organizational*, *technological*, and *geographical* fragmentations makes it particularly complex for collective action or regulation to occur effectively among platformized creative workers (p. 5). The difficulties are clear in an industry with millions of creators working in complex multiplatform environments across geographically dispersed countries, each with its own legal framework.

There is a long way to go in terms of reducing the precarity of platformized creative workers, but I share O'Meara's (2019) optimistic outlook that in this industry, those who "prioritize fellowship with other similarly positioned workers over competitive individualism are heartening and worth continued attention" (p. 9). It is indeed heartening that these sorts of collective organization seem to be picking up momentum, even if platforms such as YouTube do not recognize them fully yet. As interest in conversations around the regulation of tech giants increases, it seems inevitable that sooner or later the question of labor rights for this new category of platformized creative workers will be addressed on a more serious institutional and legal level.

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