The platformization of cultural production

Poell, Thomas; Nieborg, David ; Duffy, Brooke ; Prey, Robert; Cunningham, Stuart

Published in:
Selected Papers of AOIR 2017

Selected Papers of #AoIR2017:
The 18th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Tartu, Estonia / 18-21 October 2017

THE PLATFORMIZATION OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Thomas Poell[1], David Nieborg[2], Brooke Erin Duffy[3], Robert Prey[4], Stuart Cunningham[5]
Organization(s): 1: University of Amsterdam; 2: University of Toronto; 3: Cornell University; 4: University of Groningen; 5: Queensland University of Technology

Panel overview

This panel focuses on an emerging set of techno-economic relations reshaping cultural production and networked publics. In a growing number of industry segments—from journalism to games and from music to video and fashion—cultural entrepreneurs are finding audiences and advertisers on and via digital platforms. In response, they are reorienting their production and circulation strategies. This process of *platformization* appears to fundamentally transform the organization of cultural production, distribution and marketing. Preliminary studies on digital news publishing, for instance, indicate that 'datafication'—the systematic collection and algorithmic processing of user data—marks a shift from editorially- to demand-driven modes of production and distribution. These shape-shifting industrial practices seem to render cultural commodities 'contingent'; that is, they are not only modular in design, but also continuously reworked and repackaged, informed by datafied user feedback (Nieborg 2015).

This panel explores how platformization takes shape within different domains of cultural production, more specifically news, games, video, music, and fashion. We aim to show that similar trends can be observed across industries, as a small collective of platform corporations occupy an increasingly central position within respective markets. In the West, these are most prominently Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon (GAFA). These corporations systematically track and profile the activities and preferences of billions of users (Van Dijck 2013). In turn, this data enables the targeting and personalization of content, services, and advertising in a rapidly growing platform ecosystem (Bechmann 2013; Turow 2011). As such, online platforms effectively operate as 'multisided markets', connecting large numbers of end-users with a wide variety of complementors (Rieder & Sire 2014).

While many of these trends cut across cultural industries, there are vital differences between industries. Digital games came into being as *platform dependent* cultural commodities, whereas news has historically been *platform independent*. It is only with the rise of online-only publishers that news production is becoming reliant on the data and techno-economic standards of the GAFA platforms. Similarly, video production and distribution has been embodied in a well-established entertainment industry for almost a century before processes of platformization began to kick in. Popular music, by contrast, has very much developed alongside the platforms of its consumption. Thus, new platform-based forms of music consumption trigger intriguing questions regarding the evolution of popular music. Meanwhile, the fashion/beauty sector offers the case where many content creators and advertisers have moved from independent sites—blogs—to a single social media platform (Instagram) that's proven especially valuable for data-driven retail sales. These and other cases suggest that each instance of cultural production, while embedded in the political economy of platforms, follows a distinct trajectory with vital differences in how production and circulation processes are reorganized.

In the light of these considerations, the five papers in this panel set out to explore the similarities and differences in how platformization takes shape in various domains. Doing so, the papers address fundamental questions regarding the evolving dynamics and relations of cultural production. For one, the shift towards cultural content as a 'contingent commodity' poses new problems for cultural theorists and critics, who are confronted with cultural objects that resist stabilization. And, from a political economic perspective, the integration of cultural production in the platform ecosystem raises critical questions regarding the commercial independence of cultural content producers, as well as the long-term sustainability of platform-dependent ecosystems. Online platforms do not just enable demand-driven forms of production, but these platforms also set the governance principles (i.e. economic rules and technological standards) that guide the relationships between different actors (Gawer 2014). Finally, this dynamic affects the types of social relations constructed around particular cultural commodities and expressions of creativity. Networked publics are in this sense never simply driven by the interests and affinities of users, but also fundamentally shaped by the specific techno-economic configurations through which specific cultural items are produced and circulated. Hence, a crucial question is whether we can see particular types of networked publics emerge in the different cultural industries.

References

Bechmann, A. (2013). Internet profiling: The economy of data intraoperability on Facebook and Google. *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, *29*(55), 72–91.

Gawer, A. (2014). Bridging differing perspectives on technological platforms: Toward an integrative framework. *Research Policy*, *43*(7), 1239–1249.

Nieborg, D.B. (2015). Crushing candy: The free-to-play game in its connective commodity form. *Social Media + Society, 1*(2), 1-12.

Rieder, B., & Sire, G. (2014). Conflicts of interest and incentives to bias: A microeconomic critique of Google's tangled position on the Web. *New Media & Society*, *16*(2), 195–211.

Turow, J. (2011). *The daily you: How the new advertising industry is defining your identity and your worth*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

1. FREE-TO-PLAY APPS AND THE INTENSIFICATION OF PLATFORMIZATION

David B. Nieborg✉, University of Toronto, Canada

More than other forms of cultural content, digital games have been platform dependent from their inception. As a digital game is essentially a software program, its material, functional, and proprietary properties are constituted by its game engine or "component-based software system" (Bogost 2006). This system is platform dependent in the sense that it is non-portable and needs a dedicated hardware platform to execute the various sub-routines or codes for users to interact with the game software. Because of their platform dependency, the game industry serves as a particular rich case study to explore the technological and economic dimension of platformed modalities of production and circulation (Rochet & Tirole 2003). Montfort and Bogost (2009), for example, offer particularly valuable insights into how the Atari VCS, one of the first popular dedicated game platforms, affects game development and the video game in its commodity form. Building on this research tradition, this paper focuses on so-called 'free-to-play' apps such as *Candy Crush Saga* to argue that for the game industry the advent of both social media and general-purpose mobile platforms marks: 1) an intensification of processes of datafication, and 2) a blurring of boundaries between production and circulation.

The modular nature of games as software, combined with the more recent ability to digitally distribute game content, allows game developers and publishers to experiment with ways to extend, alter, and upgrade games post launch (Nieborg 2014). Developers can issue small patches to fix bugs or balance multiplayer games, while publishers can offer sizeable paid-for game extensions, such as expansion packs, episodes, or downloadable content (DLC) packs for console games. The latter category is emblematic of the contingent nature of games as cultural commodities. Leading game console publishers such as Electronic Arts and Activision Blizzard have fully integrated post launch monetization strategies into the core of their production and publishing pipelines to combat piracy and extend a game's shelf life. As a result, game developers have been at the forefront of exploring ways to leverage the process of datafication by systematically tracking player purchase and in game behavior. Game development, Whitson (2012, p. 24) argues, is "a numbers game": "By determining what players spend time and money on, developers rationalize production and avoid wasting resources on other assets or mechanics." Seen in this light, the increased contingency of games as cultural commodities is a seemingly natural progression rather than a radical disruption.

The global diffusion of mobile media, then, transforms the industry's dominant production logic from a product to a service design approach. Initially mobile network operators acted as gatekeepers and ran mobile platforms as "walled gardens". The platformization of the mobile industry ushered in the age of the smartphone (Ballon 2009), thereby relegating control to the owners of mobile app stores, most prominently Apple and Google. Unlike the providers of dedicated game consoles who heavily control their devices via various technological and legal lockout mechanisms, mobile platforms offer developers a much more accessible distribution platform. Also driven by innovations in game development tools and game engines, the democratization of mobile game production and distribution led to a proliferation and diversification of app development with many thousands of weekly releases.

This supply-side shift is complemented by an equally profound shift in demand, fueled by the introduction of the "free-to-play" revenue model. Not only do hundreds of millions of potential players have ready access to app stores with rich offerings of mobile games, a relatively minor change in platform governance by Apple introduced these players to optional micro-transactions (or "in-app purchases"). Similar to other advertising-driven and "freemium" based industry segments, the free-to-play business model hinges on mass scale user aggregation, and metrics or "key performance indicators" such as player engagement, retention, and ultimately monetization (Lovell 2013). Drawing on a continuous stream of player data derived from play sessions, game app development should be considered as an ongoing, cyclical process. Leveraging the modular nature of games, an app's design, its rule set and its monetization scheme are continuously altered and optimized, sometimes even on an individual player basis.

Using Activision Blizzard subsidiary King Digital, developer of franchises such as *Candy Crush*, as an example, the paper explores the free-to-play game production loop. It shows how this loop starts with "soft launching" a game in selected national app stores such as New Zealand, Ireland or Malaysia. This phase serves as the first moment to gather player data and feedback. After a revision phase, a game "goes live" and based on detailed player demographics or profiles, the company will invest heavily in thousands of granular advertising campaigns on platforms such as Facebook. Using "lifetime value" as a key metric, King is able to calculate whether the revenue derived from in-app purchases outweighs "user acquisition" costs. As such, the key competitive advantage for free-to-play developers has become the effective aggregation and monetization of a small but often lucrative group of payers or "whales" (Nieborg 2015).

A crucial question is how platformization affects the political economy of the game economy. At first glance, the capital-intensive, publisher-driven culture of console game development appears to be complemented by a diverse app ecosystem populated by a wide variety of companies, ranging from small student teams to well-funded start-ups and from incumbent game publishers to individual developers. Yet, the paper will demonstrate that the deck is heavily stacked against all but a very select group of game studios. Success stories of superstar studios gloss over the ability of social media platforms and mobile platform providers to ensure the more even distribution of players, revenue, and profit. The free-to-play model and app store design features, such as top lists and "features", heavily favor well-capitalized incumbents. Unsurprisingly, then, studies on individual app developers show frustration with Apple and Google's opaque and uneven governance policies and their subsequent effects on labour precarity (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft 2013). Free-to-play apps are a dominant category in mobile app stores and game developers are widely considered as pushing the envelope in terms of data-driven modes of app development and circulation. The question emerges to what extent the democratization of app development and distribution are offset by increased technological and economic challenges for developers in the realm of circulation, particularly in terms of app advertising.

References

Ballon, P. (2009). The platformisation of the European mobile industry. *Communications & Strategies*, (75), 15–33.

Bergvall-Kåreborn, B., & Howcroft, D. (2013). 'The future's bright, the future's mobile": A study of Apple and Google mobile application developers. *Work, Employment and Society*, *27*(6), 964–981.

Bogost, I. (2006). *Unit operations. An approach to videogame criticism.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Montfort, N. & Bogost, I. (2009). *Racing the beam. The Atari Video Computer System*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Nieborg, D.B. (2014). Prolonging the magic: The political economy of the 7th generation console game. *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, *8*(1), 47-63.

Nieborg, D.B. (2015). Crushing candy: The free-to-play game in its connective commodity form. *Social Media* + *Society, 1*(2), 1-12.

Rochet, J-C. & Tirole, J. (2003). Platform competition in two-sided markets. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, *1*(4), 990–1029.

Whitson, J. R. (2012). *Game design by numbers: Instrumental play and the quantitative shift in the digital game industry*. PhD dissertation. Carleton University, Ottawa.

2. THE PLATFORMIZATION OF POP

Robert Prey, University of Groningen

Popular music has always been intimately intertwined with the technologies of its production, distribution and consumption. For example, nowadays we take for granted that a pop song should be three or four minutes long. Rather than a reflection of listeners' attention spans however, the standard pop song is the result of historical technological limits: early phonograph records could only hold three to five minutes per side. This "phonograph effect" (Katz 2004) was amplified with the arrival of radio as the dominant medium through which music was distributed and consumed. Frequent station breaks, DJ banter, and advertising spots, institutionalized a preference for short tracks that could be slotted in and out of any listening segment - like interchangeable pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. As Mark Katz (2004, 32) writes: [t]he repetition of short pop songs over the decades almost certainly created a feedback loop in which listeners have come to expect works to be of certain length and in which performers strive (or are pressured) to meet that expectation." Popular music, in short, has historically developed alongside the platforms of its consumption.

It is thus not surprising that when new forms of music consumption emerge, so do questions and speculations about how popular music might be affected. Through interviews with musicians and music managers, and through close analysis of trade publications, this paper investigates the extent to which "platformization" - in the form of streaming services such as Spotify - is perceived to be transforming popular music.

Today, music streaming platforms are rapidly becoming the mainstream. Taken together, on-demand music streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music, and Deezer, and personalized online radio services like Pandora Internet Radio, are the fastest-growing sector of the global music industry and represent the future of music distribution and consumption in a post-download era (IFPI 2015). To date, much of the focus on streaming platforms has been on its economic role. Proponents of streaming claim that it will be the saviour of the music industry: a way to get people to pay for music and the death knell of music piracy (Halmenschlager & Waelbroeck 2012). Critics have focused on the fact that musicians are getting such small royalty cheques from streaming sites like Spotify (Marshall 2015). These are important and ongoing issues. Yet, it has also become increasingly clear that music streaming platforms will also affect how music is made and what music is released (Snickars 2016).

The appeal of streaming services lies in having instant access to a vast library of songs for a fraction of the price it would cost to acquire all that music individually. This makes it increasingly easy for new or young fans to dig deep into any artist's entire creative output or to travel to the obscure ends of any genre of music. Apart from economic benefits, the so-called 'long tail' can also have positive implications for musical culture. Musicians are of course shaped by the music they consume and, in theory, the wider the variety of music listened to, the more interesting the music that is produced (Reynolds 2011).

Pushing back against this potential is the “datafication of listening” (Prey 2016) and the profiling and targeting it allows on streaming platforms. With online music streaming all listening time has become data-generating time. This real-time data feedback loop is one of the most important distinctions between music streaming platforms and previous forms of music consumption. Paul Lamere of the music analytics company ‘The Echo Nest’ (purchased by Spotify in 2014) disclosed how ‘(e)very time a listener adjusts the volume … every time they skip a song, every time they search for an artist, or whenever they abandon a listening session, they are telling us a little bit about their music taste’ (Lamere 2014). Detailed listening practices are collected and correlated with other sources of personal data. Every signal feeds into algorithms that work toward building a profile. Artists and tracks are matched with particular listener profiles. Without our knowledge of how these processes take place, we are being classified and categorized.

At the moment, the insights provided by big data are utilized to more accurately recommend music to listeners. The question that seems to naturally flow from this, however, is how long until music is tailor-made to match these profiles? What is more, following Netflix’s lead, when will music streaming services leverage their data insights to circumvent record labels and begin producing their own original music content?

In interviews with music industry insiders, it is clear that A/B testing of songs is already underway. For example, listeners are presented with a version of a track with the ‘hook’ surfacing in the first 30 seconds. Another group of listeners hear a version where the hook doesn’t arrive until the first chorus. The popularity of song ‘A’ in comparison to song ‘B’ can be easily determined by how many times each song was skipped, and at what precise point in each song. Real-time data feedback allows for this type of testing of songs. It also extends and amplifies the modular potential of popular music, allowing songs to be rearranged, repackaged, and reformatted to fit the perceived tastes of particular listener profiles.

This paper will present an overview of the results of an ongoing study into how streaming platforms and the datafication of listening are transforming the music industry and the making of music. This paper will in particular raise questions about how platformization is transforming the creative process and the autonomy of musicians as creative producers. Theoretical issues raised as music becomes an increasingly “contingent commodity” will also be discussed. For example, what is the role of the music critic when the object of criticism is neither singular, nor stable? Finally, this paper will outline how the platformization of music compares to similar processes occurring in other creative industries discussed in this panel.

References

Halmenschlager, C., & Waelbroeck, P. (2012). Fighting free with free: streaming vs. piracy. Working paper.

IFPI, *Digital Music Report 2015*, Retrieved February 23, 2017, from http://www.ifpi.org/downloads/Digital-Music-Report-2015.pdf

Katz, M. (2004). Capturing sound. *How technology has changed music. Berkeley*.

Lamere, P. (2014, January 14). The zero button music player. *Music Machinery*. Retrieved April 1, 2015, from http://musicmachinery.com/tag/zero-ui/

Marshall, L. (2015). ‘Let's keep music special. F—Spotify’: on-demand streaming and the controversy over artist royalties. *Creative Industries Journal, 8*(2), 177-189.

Prey, R. (2016). Musica Analytica: The Datafication of Listening. In *Networked Music Cultures* (pp. 31-48). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Reynolds, S. (2011). *Retromania: Pop culture's addiction to its own past*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York.

Snickars, P. (2016). ‘More music is better music’. In Wikström, P., & DeFillippi, R. (Eds.). *Business Innovation and Disruption in the Music Industry*. Edward Elgar Publishing. Cheltenham, UK. 191–210.

3. THE PLATFORMIZATION OF NEWS

Thomas Poell, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

This paper examines how the operations of news publishers and online platforms become increasingly entangled. This development can especially be clearly observed in the case of online-only publishers, such as BuzzFeed, The Huffington Post, Vox, Upworthy, and Mashable. Over the past decade, these media companies have pioneered a new model of content production, which transforms how topics are selected, as well as how content is developed, circulated, and monetized. Online publishers typically start content production by identifying trending social media topics and popular search terms, as well as by calculating production costs, traffic, and advertising or sponsorship revenue potential of a topic and format (text or video). And when content has been published on a variety of platforms, user engagement is systematically tracked in the form of social referrals, comments, search rank, and page views. In turn, these metrics are then employed to calculate whether it is profitable to further edit and optimize content, and invest in paid-for promotion, or halt the engagement-optimization-acquisition cycle. In other words, these publishers turn content production into a *platform dependent* activity.

At the same time, the major online platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google, have developed a range of services to support and shape the production, circulation and monetization of news by both digital publishers and legacy news organizations. For one, these platforms have created guides and instructions specifying in detail how news organizations can maximize audience engagement by producing particular types of content. Furthermore, they offer a variety of data services and analytic tools for news organizations, allowing these organizations to track in detail audiences' content engagement and demographics. And, finally these platforms provide advertising networks to assist in the monetization of news content (Poell and van Dijck 2015).

In combination, these developments propel the platformization of news. That is, the news process becomes increasingly oriented towards and organized through the platform ecosystem. Platformization in this context entails a shift from an editorially-driven to a demand-driven news production and distribution process, in which content is continuously modulated, and repackaged, informed by datafied user feedback. This shift can be understood as part of a more general transformation in how knowledge is produced and codified, which Gillespie (2014) has conceptualized as the transition from "editorial logic" to "algorithmic logic". At the same time, the datafication of audiences by online platforms and digital publishers can be seen as a continuation of a long-term trend in which audience measurement firms and news producers have ever more closely monitored viewers, readers, and listeners (Anderson 2011; Napoli 2011).

Whereas these general trends have been extensively described and eloquently theorized, what platformization entails in the actual practice of news production, distribution, and monetization requires further inquiry. So far most research has focused on how legacy news organizations employ social media and audience metrics in the production and distribution of content (Lee et al. 2014; Usher 2013). Yet, given that many readers and viewers of legacy news media reside offline, and that most of these media are characterized by a strong culture of journalistic independence, the consequences of platformization cannot be observed as directly as in the case of online-only publishers. Furthermore, since platformization takes shape through the interaction between news organizations and online platforms, it is not sufficient to study how news media employ platforms. The challenge is to explore how news organizations and platforms strategically organize their operations in relation to each other.

This paper pursues such research through an examination of, on the one hand, prominent Facebook services targeted at news organizations and, on the other hand, BuzzFeed's news production, circulation, and monetization strategies. Facebook is interesting, as it has made large efforts, over the past years, to tighten its relations with the news industry through initiatives such the Instant Articles program and The Facebook Journalism Project. BuzzFeed, in turn, is relevant because it has been at the forefront of the datafication of content production and circulation, as well as of the development of new forms of native advertising or sponsored content. While the site is primarily known for its "listicles", quizzes, and cute animal pictures, it should certainly also be considered a news organization, having expanded into political and international news coverage, business news, and long-form features.

The paper draws on the many available interviews with Facebook and BuzzFeed employees, as well as on the extensive coverage of the news efforts of both companies by industry blogs and trade publications. Building on this material, the analysis shows that platformization generates tensions at a number of different levels. First, the datafication of content production and distribution puts further pressure on editorial independence. This is, however, not simply a story of audience metrics dictating editorial decisions. Although metrics from Facebook and other platforms are ubiquitously available at BuzzFeed, as they are at most other news organizations, the value of these metrics is carefully weighed. The traffic numbers for BuzzFeed's investigative journalistic stories are, for example, evaluated differently than those for listicles and quizzes.

Second, as news organizations are increasingly integrated in the platform ecosystem, the autonomy of these organizations is potentially undermined. Joining Facebook's Instant Articles program, for instance, means handing over control over the collection of user data and the monetization of content, as well as loosening the connection with audiences. At the same time, especially digital media companies such as BuzzFeed have developed many different channels through which audiences are targeted, and user data is collected. Moreover, the company, especially through its native advertising program, is able to retain significant control over the generation of revenue.

Finally, it is at the level of the news landscape as a whole that platformization poses the most fundamental questions. As audiences increasingly access news content in the social media stream, rather than through a channel controlled by the news organization itself, these organizations, particularly digital publishers such as BuzzFeed, shift towards the production of individual pieces of content for online circulation. In this context, it becomes ever more difficult to evaluate news content and attribute responsibility for the overall composition of 'the news'. In this situation accountability is ideally shared between news organizations and online platforms. However, as we have observed in the wake of the so-called fake news controversy in the US, Facebook and other online platforms are reluctant to take on such responsibilities (Isaac 2016).

References

Anderson, C. W. (2011). Deliberative, agonistic, and algorithmic audiences: Journalism's vision of its public in an age of audience transparency. *International Journal of Communication*, 5, 529-547.

Gillespie, T. (2014a). The relevance of algorithms. In T. Gillespie, P. J. Boczkowski, & K. A. Foot (Eds.), *Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality, and society* (pp. 167–193). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Isaac, M. (2016, November 12). Facebook, in cross hairs after election, is said to question its influence. *The New York Times*.

Lee, A. M., Lewis, S. C., & Powers, M. (2014). Audience clicks and news placement: A study of time-lagged influence in online journalism. *Communication Research*, *41*(4), 505-530.

Napoli, P. M. (2011). *Audience evolution: New technologies and the transformation of media audiences*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Poell, T. & J. van Dijck. 2015. Social Media and Journalistic Independence. In *Media Independence: working with freedom or working for free*, 182-201, edited by J. Bennett, N. Strange. London: Routledge.

Usher, N. (2014). *Making news at The New York Times*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

4. THE PLATFORMIZATION OF FASHION IN THE INFLUENCER ECONOMY

Brooke Erin Duffy, Cornell University

In the early 2000s, digital platforms for cultural production and distribution were ushered in with a wave of enthusiasm: with seemingly low barriers to entry, blogs, vlogs, and wikis held the promise of "empowering" ordinary citizen-consumers and redistributing the flows of power and influence (e.g., Jenkins 2006). Since then, this cyber-optimism has been tempered by critical attention to the capitalist logics animating the digital culture industries (e.g., Andrejevic 2008; Burgess and Green 2013; van Dijck and Nieborg 2009). However, the emergence of new social networks and platform-specific cultural practices means that the processes, products, and markets of creative production continue to evolve.

A key site to witness this transformation is within the realm of fashion, which, as Angela McRobbie (2015) suggests, can help us to understand the organization of labor and symbolic capital within contemporary creative economies. This paper uses the case of fashion/beauty "influencers" to examine the platforms, publics, and markets of creative labor in an age of social media. I draw upon several dozen interviews (n=50+) with key stakeholders—including online content creators, creative aspirants, and influencer agency founders—to highlight changes and continuities with existing sites of cultural production, most especially the women's magazine and advertising industries. Much like these traditional industrial contexts, the emergent ecosystem of fashion "influencers" is configured by disparities in social, economic, and aesthetic capital—all of which get partially obscured in social media's veneration of authenticity and creative independence.

From Fashion Bloggers to Social Media Influencers

In the mid-2000s, amidst upbeat narratives of social innovation infusing the culture of web 2.0, fashion and lifestyle bloggers began to garner the attention of audiences and fashion designers alike. In the popular imagination, their grassroots aesthetic and indie musings offered an antidote to high fashion's exclusivity and the walled-off expertise of fashion and beauty editors (Duffy 2013; 2015; Luvaas 2015). Over the years, the boundary between "traditional" and digital fashion authorities has blurred as part of what Rocamora (2012) describes as fashion journalism's remediation, and advertisers increasingly rely on the latter to hype branded products among their socially networked publics.

Crucially, though, the processes of content production, distribution, and promotion have grown evermore complicated with the diffusion of fashion-related content from independent blogs to various social media networks. Describing "the new influencers," a *Women's Wear Daily* columnist explained how today's style mavens "aren't just bloggers anymore…[but] are individuals who, depending on the channel, share and detail much (if not most) of their lives via YouTube, Instagram and increasingly

Snapchat" (Strugatz 2016). In such a sprawling social media ecosystem, visibility and data-driven metrics are key commodities for influencers.

The popularity of and market for influencers is staggering; one benchmark of their status is the growth of talent agencies that specialize in social media celebrities and online personalities. Company representatives routinely praise their digitally-networked clientele for their "authenticity" and "trustworthiness." While one startup founder enthused about the rise of "young content creators [armed] just with a great DSLR camera and their iPhone," another remarked on the "relatability" and "authenticity" of social media talent.

On the platform side, affiliate networks have emerged to broker the relationship between retail brands and influencers, while earning revenue based upon a fee or percentage of the latter's earnings. Some affiliates promise to help content producers "monetize" their promotional labor on a particular platform; LIKEtoKNOW.it, for instance, is an Instagram-only service operated by rewardStyle. Members use the app to tag various products or brands; then, when Instagram users then "like" a fashion post featuring a Like to Know It link, they receive an email that includes direct links to purchase the products. The availability of such monetization programs for social networks is seemingly supplanting the role of independent blogs. In particular, Instagram--with its clean aesthetic and one-click photo filters—has been accused of "killing personal style blogs" (Klein 2014). At the same time, the site's culture of "micro-celebrity…and conspicuous consumption" makes it an ideal platform for luxury imagery (Marwick 2015, p. 139).

Though social media platforms and affiliates position themselves as services for independent cultural producers, I contend that they play a key role in perpetuating the social and economic hierarchies that have long characterized the fashion and beauty sectors. For one, the compensation structures of services like LIKEtoKNOW.it are highly uneven. Fashion aspirants must first undergo a vetting process where they provide data on their "social audience"; from there, they must meet a baseline income threshold before they receive payment. One blogger confessed that she makes "pretty much nothing in revenue" from affiliate networks, while others have seen their revenue dwindle because of the oversaturated talent market.

Earning an income, too, requires a steady stream of content featuring carefully curated aesthetics and brand-name products. Social, economic, and aesthetic capital (Anderson et al. 2010) often function as prerequisites to participate in this system. Moreover, brands tend to favor particular subjectivities in these feminized spaces, therefore limiting the category of individuals who benefit from their creative and promotional labor.

Conclusion: New Players, Old Rules

Fashion and beauty influencers are upheld in the popular imagination as individuals just like us; yet, the handful of pros who "make it" tend to differ from digitally mediated publics in patterned ways. In the realm of social fashion and beauty, existing social hierarchies are exacerbated both inside and outside highly feminized brand contexts. In this respect, the influencer system is less of a meritocracy and more of what sociologist

Andrew Ross (2009) described as the “jackpot economy” wherein the “glittering prizes” are won by only “the lucky few” (p. 10). The lopsided nature of this system is concealed by the dazzle of social media with its assurances of visibility and creative meritocracy.

References

Anderson, T. L., Grunert, C., Katz, A., & Lovascio, S. (2010). Aesthetic capital: A research review on beauty perks and penalties. *Sociology Compass*, *4*(8), 564-575.

Andrejevic, M. (2008). Watching television without pity: The productivity of online fans. *Television & New Media*, *9*(1), 24-46.

Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2013). *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Duffy, B. E. (2013). *Remake, remodel: Women’s magazines in the digital age*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Klein, A. (2014, June). Is Instagram killing personal style blogs. *Fashionista*. Retrieved from: http://fashionista.com/2014/06/will-instagram-kill-fashion-blogs

Luvaas, B. (2016). *Street style: An ethnography of fashion blogging*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Marwick, A. E. (2015). "Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy." *Public Culture* 27, *1*(75), 137-160.

McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Rocamora, A. (2012). Hypertextuality and remediation in the fashion media: The case of fashion blogs. *Journalism Practice*, 6, 92–106.

Ross, A. (2009). *Nice work if you can get it: Life and labor in precarious times*. New York: NYU Press.

Strugatz, R. (2016, August 10). Bloggers and digital influencers are reshaping the fashion and beauty landscape. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from; http://www.latimes.com/fashion/la-ig-bloggers-20160809-snap-story.html

Van Dijck, J., & Nieborg, D. B. (2009). Wikinomics and its discontents: A critical analysis of Web 2.0 business manifestos. *New Media & Society, 11*(5), 855–874.

5. PLATFORMIZATION OF VIDEO PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION

Stuart Cunningham, Queensland University of Technology

The platformization of screen/video has been both rapid and profound. It exemplifies the process this panel investigates, which ‘appears to fundamentally transform the organization of cultural production, distribution and marketing’. The most dynamic and innovative global online entertainment video distributors and, increasingly, producers, include the worlds’ largest digital television portals (HBO Now, Netflix, Amazon Video) and social media platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Weibo, WeChat). Netflix has 80 million subscribers in 190 countries and represents itself as “the birth of a new global Internet TV service.” But these numbers pale in comparison to social media platforms such as YouTube, which features 1 billion users in 88 countries and 76 languages. YouTube is a distant second to Facebook, with more than 1.7 billion users, which represents more than half of the global online population. Digital television *portals* (Lotz 2017) combine mainstream long form premium content with sophisticated algorithmic feedback (Hallinan and Striphas 2016). Social media *platforms* offer scale, technological affordance and – especially in the case of YouTube – remuneration and upskilling to vernacular creators.

This paper concentrates on social media *platforms* and on fundamental questions raised by ‘social media entertainment’ (SME) (Cunningham and Craig 2016; Cunningham et al 2016): the emergence of a proto-industry based on professionalizing amateur creators engaging in content innovation and media entrepreneurship across multiple social media platforms to aggregate global fan communities and incubate their own media brands. More than 2.5 million YouTube creators globally receive some level of remuneration from their uploaded content and more than 2000 YouTube professionalizing-amateur channels have at least a million subscribers (and many of the more influential creators have less than a million subscribers).

In doing so - based on extensive field and analytical research conducted collaboratively (including 140 interviews with SME participants) – the paper enacts a number of conceptual innovations in media and communication studies. The political economy of this new proto-industry is analyzed as the extremely volatile, interdependent clash of cultures between Hollywood (mass entertainment media) and Silicon Valley (iterative IT experimentation), rather than as capitalist hegemons conducting business as usual. It treats SME’s rapidly-scaling globality, not only as another instance of Western cultural imperialism, but as facilitated by content not governed by standard copyright industry high-control regimes. It evidences SME creators, and the publics they attract, as younger and much more diverse than mainstream screen media. It approaches the question of SME commercialism by focusing on the management and disciplining of brand culture through the twinned discourses of authenticity and community in SME’s fundamental modes of address.

The political economy of SME focuses on established entertainment industry players, norms, principles and practices ceding significant power and influence to the new digital streaming platforms driven by the secular and now dramatic drift of advertising to digital platforms such as Google and Facebook. At the same time, the techno-economic logics of hyperscale and permanent beta cannot guarantee sustained success, as the business-model vicissitudes of Twitter and the rapid rise and demise of Vine attest. For creators, the massive growth in scale of SME content has destroyed value (Green 2014) – the click-per-thousand rate that drives Google's Ad Sense revenue-sharing on YouTube has bottomed out, driving creators into further non-scalable engagements to restore value (brand deals, merchandising, television and cable options, and live appearances, licensing content). This has direct implications for the long-term sustainability of this platform-dependent video content ecosystem.

Only a few content formats survive under the Darwinian selection pressures of platform dependent (or "born digital") SME. As SME thought leader Hank Green says, "there are only three genuinely new cheap-to-produce, high-quality content that viewers really, really love" (Dredge 2015): vlogging, gameplay, and style tutorials. "Other content has been nearly impossible to make work", he argues. "Narrative content has existed mostly as aspirational, money-losing, pre-pilot pilots for TV shows. Even content that TV people consider dirt cheap (like game shows, talk shows, and reality shows) is hard to produce with online video budgets" (Green 2015). Fundamental discourses asserting the integrity and value of SME have been developed around the economics of amateurs demonstrating proof-of-concept popularity under real-time conditions of demand-driven forms of production.

SME authenticity is based on a fully-fledged critique of legacy media, striking at its core of well-told stories, following established narrative-fiction conventions, produced, written and acted by appropriately trained professionals. SME authenticity breaks through all of these artifices and marginalizes all those artificers. Vloggers are real people, their communities assert; an actor is just "a body with a script" (Pitman 2015). But this is inherently volatile, as any and all claims to authenticity are tested continuously in a call-and-response rhetorical field with the community called into being by such claims. The commercial interests of brands, driven by the influencer status of creators, have to be articulated into this volatile dialogic dynamic. Brands enter the picture *after* the establishment of this dialogic relationship between authenticity and community and feed off it as a secondary relationship, which is continually reinforced *as* a secondary relationship by the creator as they negotiate their authenticity status with their community.

Creators labor within an 'algorithmic culture' (Striphas 2015) which governs performance by reinforcing constant and regular uploading and commits the creator to increasing workloads as multiplatform activity becomes imperative. At the same time, technological affordances generate greater access and abundant content distribution, near-frictionless global scale, limited regulation, greater personal brand ownership, customized user interfaces and curation, and sophisticated analytics.

Ongoing research on which this paper is based demonstrates that the publics SME generates are more youth-oriented, racially plural, multicultural and gender-diverse than mainstream screen media. In 2015, Mashable.com, a global, multi-platform media and entertainment that focuses on entertainment news, issued a series of diversity reports regarding onscreen representations of and narratives about minorities. The film, television, and games industries received grades of C and D, whereas online garnered the only A. According to the editors, in contrast to traditional media, “the digital entertainment space has always been pioneering in including people of all stripes, and continued to broaden in 2015” (Hamedy 2015).

References

Cunningham S. and Craig D. (2016). Online Entertainment: A new wave of media globalization? *International Journal of Communication, 10*(2016), 5409–5425.

Cunningham S., Craig D., and Silver J. (2016). YouTube, Multichannel Networks and the accelerated evolution of the new screen ecology. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies, 22*(4), 376-391.

Dredge, S. (2015). YouTube: Hank Green tells fellow creators to aim for ‘$1 per view’. *The Guardian*, 08 April. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/apr/08/hank-green-youtube-1000-cpm-vlogbrothers (Accessed 20 November 2015).

Green, H. (2014). “The $1,000 CPM: advertising is a kinda shitty model. It’s very exciting that we’re moving beyond it”. *Medium.com*, 15 April. https://medium.com/@hankgreen/the-1-000-cpmf92717506a4b

Hallinan, B. & Striphas T. (2016). Recommended for you: The Netflix Prize and the production of algorithmic culture, *New Media & Society, 18*(1), 117-137.

Hamedy, S. (2015). Diversity report card: YouTubers get the only 'A' grade of 2015 http://mashable.com/2015/12/29/diversity-report-card-online-video-2015/#sns8WbW5.8qI

Lotz, A. D. (2017). *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9699689

Pittman, T. (2015). How YouTubers Became A New Breed Of Celebrity That Hollywood Stars Can't Touch. *The Huffington Post*, 03 March. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/teens-prefer-youtubers-over-celebrities_n_6801792.html?section=australia (Accessed 30 January 2017).

Striphas, T. (2015). “Algorithmic Culture.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 18*(4-5), 395-412.