Creator Culture

An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment

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NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York

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New York
www.nyupress.org

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Cunningham, Stuart, editor.
Title: Creator culture : an introduction to global social media entertainment / edited by Stuart Cunningham and David Craig ; Foreword by Nancy K. Baym.
Description: New York : New York University Press, [2021] |
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020039531 (print) | LCCN 2020039532 (ebook) | ISBN 9781479879304 (hardback) | ISBN 9781479817979 (paperback) | ISBN 9781479837601 (ebook) | ISBN 9781479890118 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Social media. | Mass media. | Creative ability.
Classification: LCC HM741 .C74 2021 (print) | LCC HM741 (ebook) | DDC 302.23/1—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020039531
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020039532

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Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Also available as an ebook

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Introduction

STUART CUNNINGHAM AND DAVID CRAIG

What we call *creator culture* is being constructed around the opportunities and challenges that have emerged as established media and communication industries begin to share the content and distribution space with digital streaming and social networking platforms. These structural changes in the media landscape have, in turn, contributed to the rise of an industry and culture populated by native social media entrepreneurs. Creators can be simply defined in the words of the social media entertainment (SME) thought leader Hank Green (2016) as any creator "making all or part of their living making stuff on the internet, or are working toward that goal."

The term signifies a distinction from an earlier phase of online content creation characterized by "user-generated content" (UGC). UGC referred to any form of content generated by users of digital platforms, and early scholarly attention rarely entertained the possibility that such activity might give rise to viable entrepreneurial careers. We believe the term *creator*—which we define rather more fully than Hank Green as commercializing and professionalizing native social media users who generate and circulate original content in close interaction and engagement with their communities on the major social media platforms as well as offline—is the term that captures best what is at stake in this book's mapping of approaches to this emerging culture. Creators are dubbed many things now: influencers, bloggers and vloggers, gameplayers, livestreamers, camgirls, broadcast jockeys (Korea), and, in China, KOLs (key opinion leaders), *zhubo*, and *wanghong*, among others. They can be referred to by platform use: YouTubers, tweeters (Twitter), grammers (Instagram), and snappers (Snapchat). Scholars previously coined terms such as "micro-celebrities" (Senft 2008; Abidin 2016), although by now many of these creators have developed greater cultural influence

than mainstream celebrities: think of Zhang Dayi (China), Huda Beauty (Dubai), Chiara Ferragni (Italy), PewDiePie (UK), Ninja (US), to name a few. Terminological profusion is an index of the increasing importance of this field of study. Even Hollywood producers, writers, and showrunners routinely refer to themselves as "creators." Nowadays, some of these terms have gone completely viral. Martha Lincoln (@heavyredaction) tweeted apropos an encounter in a classroom, "A student has just astonished me by writing 'Influencers such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.'"

The creator culture that this volume seeks to define and investigate draws on a range of scholarship in media and communication studies, science and technology studies, and social media, internet, and platform studies. We mapped its industrial dimensions in *Social Media Entertainment: The New Industry at the Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* (Cunningham and Craig 2019). There, we traced the emergence of a phenomenon emerging outside broadcasting and the digital streaming platforms (for example, Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, iQiyi, and Hotstar). Rather, these creators are native to social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and their Chinese counterparts Youku, Weibo, and WeChat. Conditions of labor are volatile and precarious but also more empowered, in contrast to early careerists in Hollywood and the media industries. SME also represented a significant space for new, and much more diverse, voices with the means for cultural assertion as much as commercial media production. Combined, these factors generated a different globalization dynamic that has scaled with great velocity, enabling multimodal content (posts, vlogs, tweets, grams, snaps, and streams) to travel the world without conventional intellectual property (IP) control and posing new challenges for established media companies and regulatory regimes. In this introduction, we elaborate briefly on the industrial underpinnings and global dimensions of creator culture and then introduce the chapters to follow.

The development of creator culture will have reached the fifteen-year mark by 2021, starting with the launch of YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook and their Chinese counterparts around 2005. YouTube has been a critical platform for creators, particularly after acquisition in 2006 by Google, introducing features and services that empowered, and often inhibited, creators, but always in service of the shifting interests of the plat-

form. A short list includes content management systems, programmatic advertising, partnership agreements, programmable channels, mobility, subscription platforms, community pages, ecommerce and merchandise integrations, online mobile payment systems, and livestreaming. There are similar stories of strong growth of native content creation on platforms such as Twitch, Instagram, Facebook, and even Twitter.

The reality is multiplatform for most creators, although the materiality of platform affordances generates real differences in practice: an Instagram beauty vlogger is different from a YouTube content creator, as is a Twitch gameplayer, a Snap storyteller, or a Momo showroom host. In turn, the commercializing practices of creators operating in this industry reflect a diverse portfolio of revenue streams across platforms, in established media as well as off media. Vital to our understanding is that these conditions extend across all social media platforms, many of which have integrated comparable forms of modality (video), monetization (programmatic advertising), and partnership agreements with their native creators.

China's alternative creator industry is a wild card that may upset the accepted understanding of the way cultural influence flows globally. *Wanghong* means "popular online" or "internet famous" and carries connotations that can embrace the entire industry or refer to celebritization as a problematic process, as well as describing the specific subcomponent of Chinese creator culture on livestreaming platforms. China's industry features a highly competitive platform landscape, incubated through regulatory protection and fueled by a rising middle class, and offers more diverse and potentially lucrative opportunities for creators than its Western counterparts. When *wanghong* makes the leap past the Great Chinese Firewall, Western entertainment hegemony may be imperiled. And there are vibrant creator cultures in numerous places around the world that are little beholden to face-offs with old Western hegemons or, for that matter, emerging Eastern ones.

Studying the Social Media Entertainment Industry

"Does the world really need one more field of study?" Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (2009) ask this question in introducing their field-setting volume *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*. Our answer

would be that as industries and cultures change, so fields of study need to change. *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment* introduces readers to "ways of seeing" social media entertainment from perspectives that critically assess claims for its relation to, yet differentiation from, well-established media forms and institutions traditionally within scope for media studies, as well as differentiation from the agendas now established within social media studies. This volume does not seek to impose a uniform perspective; rather, our goal is to stimulate in-depth, globally focused engagement with this industry and establish a dynamic research agenda attractive to scholars, teachers, and students, as well as to creators and media professionals across the media, communication, and social media industries.

The scholarly foundations of the volume draw on diverse, interrelated disciplines, theories, analytic frameworks, and methodologies. Holt and Perren, in looking to define media industries studies, argued that the field relied on knowledge generated in cultural and creative industries, mass communication, sociology and anthropology, media economics and industrial analysis, political economy and cultural studies, journalism, film and TV studies, and cultural policy. Together with these influences, we suggest that studying the creator culture developed by social media entertainment requires disciplinary input from internet studies, social media studies, and science and technology studies.

There are many productive differences in approach and perspective in the chapters to follow. But what everyone agrees on is that social media entertainment (or whatever contributors call it) is a *thing*. But what sort of the thing is it? Is it an industry? And, if so, what kind of an industry? Nitin Govil poses an interesting question of great relevance to our project when he notes that "most studies proceed from a general understanding of what an industry comprises, with a tacit sense of its boundaries and capacities." One of the "entrenched yet under examined presumptions" of studies of media industries is the "obviousness of its object" (Govil 2013, 173). Govil attributes the fact that the Indian film industry was finally granted official industry status by government only after decades of lobbying principally to the lack of reliable statistical data. An industry that innovatively made the most of its informality had ultimately to embrace formalization to advance. Popular and political ambivalence about the industry had to give way in order for it to be

placed on proper legal and financial footing. Govil argues that "we need to broaden the range of practices that count as industrial" and that we need "a more dynamic sense of industries as social and textual arrangements . . . and other dramaturgies of interaction, reflection, and reflexivity" (176).

In this spirit, we posit three basic criteria for considering SME as an industry: size and scope, differentiation from neighboring industries, and degree of formalization.

Gaining *authoritative, independent data on the scale and economic value* that platforms and creators derive from SME is almost impossible at this stage of its evolution as an industry. And any data that can be derived will date quickly, given that growth year on year in these early growth stages is remarkable and remarkably global. Data that are made available are mostly from single platforms, whereas creators' revenue sources typically involve multiple platforms and strategies including crowdfunding, licensing, and direct brand deal making. Platforms have more than one revenue stream from which creators may or may not benefit, but publicly revealing the full story would risk flights of, and fights between, creators and expose platforms' accounting practices. It is always better, think platforms, to impose nondisclosure agreements and deal separately or even purely algorithmically with creators.

YouTube's referencing of creator statistics is classic "spin." A typical statement from Google CEO Sundar Pichai in 2019 touted the ever-increasing monetization opportunities that YouTube provides for creators. "The number of channels with more than 1 million subscribers doubled in 2018," he said, "and the number of creators earning between $10,000 and $1 million from YouTube AdSense grew 40% year-over-year. (Currently, there are upwards of 5,000 channels with at least 1 million subscribers.)" (Weiss 2019). (That figure had grown to more than 16,000 in late 2019.) Who qualifies to be a "partner" has changed semi-regularly, programmatic advertising revenue splits vary between "premium" and "nonpremium" creators, and YouTube has introduced new revenue sources: subscriptions, memberships, e-commerce, and virtual goods. Compared to other platforms' public accounting of creator practice, however, YouTube is relatively transparent. Another exception to the deep opaqueness may be Amazon-owned Twitch. Its platform blog offers explicit dollar figures for aspiring Twitch partners and de-

clares over 27,000 partners as of October 2019, albeit with no indication of total revenue across revenue streams including advertising, virtual goods, and subscriptions.

Attempts to track economic value across multiple platforms and allied funding sources are legion but almost always unverifiable and must be taken under advisement, as they usually come from vested advertising and marketing interests. Business journalists' accounts of the "influencer economy" vary from $1 billion in 2018 (Adweek 2019) to $10 billion in 2020 (National Public Radio 2019). Researchers wanting to dig deeper into such figures would need to ask if they are limited to influencer marketing without programmatic advertising, focused exclusively on the brand-rich environment of Instagram only, and limited to the advertising verticals of beauty and lifestyle alone.

It is possibly even more difficult to be assured of data clarity in China's alternative creator universe. The "*wanghong* economy," according to industry data firms like CBNData, may have eclipsed China's film industry at near US$10 billion in 2016 and was worth US$15 billion a year later (Asia Pacific 2018). Or this could even be the "$24 billion Chinese industry you've never heard of" (Youmshajekian 2019).

The value proposition that third-party data firms such as Social Blade, Tubefilter, and Captive8 offer to the industry is to combine data across platforms and revenue portfolios and package such information as the basis for creators' sales strategies for securing paying customers. However, their estimates are limited without direct access to creators' platform application programming interfaces (APIs), which are repositories of more sophisticated measures such as indicators of "engagement." According to Social Blade, the leading DIY beauty vlogger and queer political activist Ingrid Nilsen makes between $155 and $2,500 a month, $2,000 to $30,000 a year, but none of these data points recognizes her multiyear "glambassadorships" with the likes of Clairol or bareMinerals, which are almost certainly orders of magnitude greater than these figures.

For nearly a decade, *Forbes* has tracked the highest paid influencers, creators, and YouTubers via a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, in partnership with social insight firms, across multiple platform data sources, coupled with economic assessments of endorsements and offline businesses. In 2011, *Forbes* generated a list of the top "social

media influencers"—primarily social media marketing experts operating on Twitter—derived from an "Identified Consumer Count" metric developed by a data firm called PeekYou (Shaughnessy 2011). By 2017, *Forbes*'s list had grown to over one hundred "influencers" across multiple platforms and content verticals like pets, fitness, and gaming; the list was to be published quarterly (O'Connor 2017). *Forbes*'s efforts proved unsustainable. Its 2019 list was reduced to the top ten "YouTube Stars," led by eight-year-old Ryan Kaji of Ryan's World, with $26 million in revenue, based on "data from Captiv8, SocialBlade, and Pollstar as well as interviews with industry stars" (Berg 2019). The dramatic changes in method and outcome in these lists reflect the difficult conditions under which scholars and students must work to assess the scale and economic value of the industry.

Creator advocates have also invested resources seeking to influence political and policy understanding about the scale and scope of the industry on a (US) state-by-state basis. *America's New Creative Economy* is a US-centric analysis of the creator economy funded by the Re:Create Coalition—a creator-focused NGO—prepared by a team of economists. While the lead economist informed us that the report is full of "heroic assumptions" (Shapiro 2018), nonetheless, the report suggests that upward of 10 percent of the US labor force is making some form of revenue by harnessing social media platforms (Shapiro with Aneja 2018). The second report, published in 2019, revealed sustainable growth of creator income at a rate of more than 17 percent per year and growth to more than $1 billion in the size of this economy (Shapiro with Aneja 2019). (We revisit the Re:Create Coalition in chapter 14.)

Comparing and *differentiating* SME from neighboring industrial formations is a constant challenge, as it morphs rapidly. Its history, as we see it (and as set out in Cunningham and Craig 2019, 37–62), shows three distinct phases. Its first phase begins centrally with YouTube providing open access to share content and foster community, thus distinguishing itself from digital TV portals. A distinct second phase is marked by the increased competition from second-generation platforms and the rise of multiplatforming. These were the "New Tubes" consolidated, acquired, internally launched, and feature-enhanced by the SME majors, Google/YouTube, Facebook/Instagram, Twitter/Periscope/Vine, Amazon/Twitch, and Snapchat. In turn, this enhanced platform landscape fos-

tered new types of creators (for example, Snappers, Grammers, Viners). We are now in a third phase, arguably marked by the "Adpocalypse" in 2017 and the increased challenges confronting creators as the platforms face a rapidly growing crisis of governance, first in the European Union, then in other jurisdictions, and now increasingly in the United States. The 2019 backlash toward child creators was deemed the "second Adpocalypse," signaling, for some observers, that the "Golden Age of YouTube is over" (Alexander 2020).

In our previous work on the subject, we say, "Vital to grasping the significance of SME is understanding how social media entertainment platforms operated as both content delivery systems and networked communication technology" (Cunningham and Craig 2019, 32). SME creator culture is being developed and practiced at the intersection of the digital and the social, the interpersonal and the mass, and established and emerging media industries, and studying it means drawing on several disciplinary traditions, as we aim to show in this book.

SME is *both* a content *and* a communication industry; creators *both* produce and distribute content *and* manage communities. Nancy Baym makes clear with respect to the broader phenomenon of new media that they blur boundaries between established communication subdisciplines (interpersonal, group, mass) as well as blurring the linear conception in mass communication media of one-to-many production-reception:

> One of the most exciting elements of new media is that they allow us to communicate personally within what used to be prohibitively large groups. This blurs the boundary between mass and interpersonal communication in ways that disrupt both. When people gather online to talk about a television show they are a mass communication audience, but the communication they have with one another is both interpersonal, directed to individuals within the group, and mass, available for anyone to read. If, as increasingly happens, conversations and materials these fans produce for one another are incorporated into the television show, the boundaries between the production and reception of mass media are blurred as well. (2015, 4)

We have distinguished SME from mass-media frameworks and mainstream screen industries in our previous work (Cunningham and Craig

2019, 8–15). There, we stress the differences between the "born digital," "network native," and "mobile friendly" social platforms on which SME operates, on the one hand, and traditional media, on the other. We point to the pro-am status of the SME creator, the new genres and formats invented, the open intellectual property protocols under which it circulates globally, and the centrality of community development and maintenance as the core *work* in creator culture.

From the perspective of the interpersonal (and group) communication subdisciplines, SME can be viewed from the perspective of the perceived elitism of mass media and its "powerful subversion": "the gatekeeping function of mass media is challenged as individuals use digital media to spread messages much further and more widely than was ever historically possible" (Baym 2015, 11). Just as synchronous person-to-person and small-group communication developed early in the internet's history (Baym 2015, 15), so the video log, or vlog, was, and has continued to be, fundamental to the early commercial internet and to SME. The centrality of livestreaming to contemporary SME reaffirms communication as much as content defines creator culture.

As we outline in the concluding chapter of this book, much scholarship has focused on the downsides of *formalization* of previously amateur content-production culture on social media platforms. (Chapters 5, 9, and 12 also engage with issues of industry formalization.) Instead, we argue there that SME has developed rapidly and that its current shape and future prospects require greater attention to industrial formalization. As we have just seen, one of the key distinguishing features of SME is the (previously) amateur status of creator culture. This has made SME one of the outstanding examples of what Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas (2015) stress are the innovations that informal media practices have contributed to the institutionalized media industries. A formalizing industry that begins to regulate itself effectively and accepts, where appropriate, the necessity of state regulation is a sign of a maturing industry advancing from its days as the "Wild West" (Mann 2014). As Govil reminds us, one of the key dynamics that inhibit the advance of an industry through appropriate formalization is the degree of acceptance of its bona fides in popular opinion and by the state. Critical scholarship can support this recognition and thus the sustainability of creator culture.

The Chapters to Come

The purpose of this book is to provide resources for understanding, studying, and researching creator cultures in the emerging industry of social media entertainment. We have organized the chapters under three broad heuristic domains, or approaches, through which readers can make sense of the formation of creator cultures in this new industry configuration and the theoretical, methodological, cultural, social, textual, policy, and political issues it raises. These approaches—"Frameworks and Methods," "Genres and Communities," and "Industries and Governance"—form the part structure of the book. Readers will find that there are inevitable and productive cross-referencing of these approaches within many of the chapters. As we introduce the contributing chapters here, we also suggest many links between and across these domains that will encourage you to explore deeper into the field and "connect the dots."

Frameworks and Methods

As we have seen, because SME creator culture sits at the intersection of the digital and the social, the interpersonal and the mass, and established and emerging media industries, it has attracted a range of disciplinary approaches and perspectives. In part 1, several frameworks and methods are explored.

Chapter 1, by Jean Burgess, introduces platform studies, establishing the importance of platforms to creator culture and giving an overview of the platformization of the web, the consequences for media power, and the sometimes supportive, often adversarial, but always political, relations between creators and platforms. It then gives an overview of the field of platform studies before discussing three distinctive but complementary approaches to researching platforms in general and YouTube in particular. These approaches are characterized by critical and qualitative perspectives on issues such as the role of algorithms, computational digital methods using platform APIs, and hybrid methods such as the "app walkthrough." The chapter concludes with some guidelines on the way these methods can be combined to help empower creator communities by enhancing and amplifying their knowledge of how platforms work.

Feminist studies of creator culture are featured elsewhere in this volume (chapter 7, by Duffy and Sawey) but are the structural framework through which Zoë Glatt and Sarah Banet-Weiser, in chapter 2, examine the work of feminist YouTube content creators in the context of popular feminist economies of visibility and an interrelated theoretical analytic of "productive ambivalence." YouTube has been celebrated by many people as a platform that has enabled far more diverse screen representations of race, gender, and sexuality than television and film media do, as is undoubtedly the case. However, feminist YouTube creators have to navigate what are often contradictory pressures in order to gain visibility and earn a living, such as appealing to commercial brands while maintaining their political integrity and cultivating authenticity with their audiences. The work of feminist content creators on YouTube is complex, and so a reductive explanatory frame is resisted. With the analytic of productive ambivalence, this chapter aims to complicate the dominance of popular feminism online by asking, to what extent are professional YouTube content creators able to present more radical versions of feminism or else pushed to fit into neoliberal brand culture in order to gain visibility and income?

In chapter 3, Brent Luvaas discusses the affordances and limitations of autoethnography as a method of social media research. Describing his own experiences as a street style blogger, the chapter introduces the experiential modes of data gathering that autoethnography enables as well as the emotional toll that such methodologies can inflict. Autoethnography provides embodied ways of knowing that no other form of social scientific research can provide. But it also entails affective and existential risk. Becoming what we study is a process not easily undone. And it is one whose ending is not easy to predict. As Luvaas was becoming a blogger, bloggers were becoming something else: social media "influencers" who leverage their personal brands across platforms. To perpetuate his blog, he had to become an influencer too, an identity about which he remained deeply ambivalent.

Carlos A. Scolari, Damián Fraticelli, and José M. Tomasena, in chapter 4, produce a case study of a SME genre rarely discussed: book reviewers on YouTube ("BookTubers"). The case study traces the progressive professionalization of Spanish-language BookTubers and their battles with the book industry while at the same time engaging in a mas-

ter class on semiotic and discursive analysis in the European tradition. Good examples of discourse analysis of creator production to compare and contrast with this chapter can be found in chapters 2, 7, 9, and 10.

Critical media industry studies (CMIS) is a middle-range approach that seeks to account for both structure *and* agency, power *and* resistance, in media industries. Using CMIS as a framework, chapter 5, by David Craig, Stuart Cunningham, and Junyi Lv, adopts a creator-centric optic to illustrate the interdependencies among industrial, social, technological and economic, and political vectors in Chinese livestreaming. As a state-protected and surveilled industry, China's livestreaming has more genres, revenue models, and participation compared with Western formats. The authors find highly advanced e-commerce integration on platforms that have underpinned livestreamers' *economic* sustainability. However, this enhanced sustainability has to be placed against the *social and political* precarity of the ever-present possibility of state action upholding "social morality."

Chapters in this section (and elsewhere) are careful to highlight the range of methods used to research SME and creator culture: document analysis, interviewing, and textual and discourse analysis are commonly used methods, but we also encounter ethnographic, autoethnographic, and computational digital methods as well as hybrid critical and qualitative methods such as the app walkthrough.

Genres and Communities

Apart from this section's treatment of major SME genres gameplay, fashion and lifestyle, and toy unboxing, you will find analysis of other genres elsewhere in the book: book reviewing in chapter 4, livestreaming in chapter 5. Comedy, satire and prank formats are discussed in this section in chapters 9 and 10.

Hector Postigo's chapter 6 notes that scholars of media industries and other creative cultures have often reported research findings through the lenses of qualitative data (interviews and participant observation), interpretation, and analysis. This chapter describes immersive research methods that Postigo used while studying creative communities on YouTube. But the chapter sits in this section because it also gives us one of the richest—dare we say, most authentic—accounts of the sheer skill,

commitment, and hard work demanded of creators in the genre of video gameplay commentary (one of the core SME genres). Postigo also says that the chapter yields findings and methods that are transferable to studying other creator communities. The chapter explores the concept of "authenticity" as a useful (or not) heuristic for understanding what exactly creative communities, like the one featured in this chapter, are trying to portray as they present themselves and their products to audiences. Chapters 3 and 6 make a compelling duet regarding the power and challenge of ethnographic method.

Brooke Erin Duffy and Megan Sawey look at Instagram content creators and their main genre, fashion and lifestyle. Their chapter 7 shifts the conceptual focus of social media influence from labor to service. Instagram-based influencers are beholden to three distinctive groups—audiences, advertisers, and the wider creator community—that exert competing demands on their time, energy, and creative output. After exploring how the provision of service to these groups shapes the cultural experiences and valuations of influencers on Instagram, Duffy and Sawey ultimately locate the power in the hands of the platform itself. It is instructive to compare this account of creator agency with the strongly positive account in chapter 10 and the analytic of "productive ambivalence" advanced in chapter 2.

Jarrod Walczer, in chapter 8, studies the way toy unboxing creator communities have survived the ElsaGate scandal and KidPocalypse of 2017 (in which trusted children's brands were spoofed, satirized, and subverted on YouTube with much panic and scrutiny). To do this, they have had to self-organize and more radically brand themselves as progressive purveyors of quality YouTube-native content for kids. Nevertheless, questions remain as to whether these creator-centric communities are just a second coming of old-style multichannel networks. This chapter profiles both pocket.watch and Family Video Network, asking whether these new organizations are bent on profitability and mass acquisition or whether they represent a new type of community-management and creator-governance formation. Creators seeking to take greater control over the volatile platform environments they work in through self-governance is a theme also taken up in chapter 14.

The creator cultures forming around social media entertainment are thoroughly global, regional, and nationally specific in extent and diver-

sity. Chapter 9, by Sangeet Kumar, Sriram Mohan, and Aswin Punathambekar, insists on a regional frame "beyond the nation" as the primary organizing category for the production and circulation of SME culture. In the peninsular region of South India, there is a well-entrenched Hindi-Urdu circuit of cultural exchange between India and Pakistan on YouTube that has advanced a "regional imaginary," often based on affinities of language, cultural idioms, and social similitude, and has enabled dialogue and cultural exchange across fractious national borders.

Mohamed El Marzouki maps the field of creator culture in the Middle East and North Africa in chapter 10. He begins by outlining social, political, and technological developments that furnished the conditions of possibility for the rise of youth digital media culture across the Arab world, including the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions of youth in light of decades of political authoritarianism and state monopolies on media and cultural institutions. The chapter examines the political purchase of youth digital media culture in relation to the online and offline microeconomic processes and monetization schemes that young social media creators engage in to sustain their digital media ventures.

Industries and Governance

In chapter 11, Elaine Jing Zhao exemplifies how a focus on creator culture can illuminate and ground an industrial framework. As the internet opens up pathways to fame and notoriety in an environment of supercharged transformation, *wanghong* (internet famous) has become arguably even more of a cultural and socioeconomic phenomenon in China than elsewhere and constitutes a rapidly growing part of Chinese social media entertainment. The chapter critically examines *wanghong* through multiple layers of liminality: between the professional and amateur, between authenticity and performance, between public and private, and between being celebrated and being disciplined. The theme of creator labor is a constant in the book, and you will encounter it in several chapters; the specificity of China is also considered in chapter 5.

Chapter 12 is a study of the industrial culture of Chilean advertising as it is changing to accommodate SME creators. Deploying the Bourdieusian notion of cultural field, Arturo Arriagada argues that creators and advertising agencies work together as dual markets within the industry.

These markets can be approached as a field where actors compete to legitimize their forms of knowledge, expertise, and taste classifications for the promotion of brands and products. Creators and advertising agencies appear to have a mutually constitutive influence: while creators challenge the power of advertisers by configuring a type of labor, based on knowledge of platforms and promotion, that validates the online content-creation economy, advertisers must accommodate and learn to respect creator authenticity as the basis for extracting value from their relationships with follower communities.

In chapter 13, Jeremy Shtern and Stephanie Hill place social media content creators in a historical frame and under the scrutiny of political economy. The return to sponsorship as a popular model of funding social media entertainment revives a controversial media monetization practice that previously jeopardized consumer trust in advertising and attracted scrutiny from both the public and regulatory agents from as early as the 1930s. This chapter considers sponsored social media content in this historical context, examining how it creates power for advertisers by commodifying social media audiences and analyzing the ways in which media policy and industry regulation currently provide oversight. The extent to which the viability of creator culture hinges on consumer trust, and how effective government and industry standards act as guarantor, quality assurer, and occasional regulator of trustworthiness, is at issue. Shtern and Hill's approach to advertising and to regulation can be profitably compared to those in chapters 12 and 14, respectively.

Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, in chapter 14, offer a creator-centric account of industrial, governance, and rights issues in SME. Social media entertainment is characterized by what appears as a gross power asymmetry between platforms and creators: world-leading and globe-spanning hegemonic organizations, weak intermediary structures, and a "workforce" that is young, globally dispersed, and composed of mostly sole traders. However, this chapter, theoretically framed by a Foucauldian understanding of power as relational and contingent and insights from network economics, suggests a more supple account of power and some progress in collective action and advocacy in the representation of creator rights. The interests of creators are examined in the "top-down" context of the exercise of platform governance and efforts, by platforms and the state, to improve it. Those interests are also

canvassed from the "bottom up"—how creators and creator advocacy are organizing and acting collectively to improve prospects for creators in this emerging industry.

"The World Only Spins Forward"

Between delivering this manuscript in 2019 and responding to its review in May 2020, the world tilted on its axis with the global pandemic, COVID-19. The pandemic has killed hundreds of thousands, wreaked economic havoc, and heightened political unrest, leaving our lives quarantined and social practices virtualized. Traditional media industries are both reeling and benefiting from such huge disruption. Live entertainment, theatrical distribution, theme parks, and scripted production are shuttered, while streaming video portals and online video games proliferate as vital services to locked-down populations across the globe. The SME industry has been boosted as audiences crowd online; chapter 5, for example, notes that China's *wanghong* industry has become a vital engine for sustaining the growth of China's digital economy. This book, introducing the emerging field of studies of creator culture in the SME industry, is supremely timely. As creator cultures evolve by responding during and after this crisis, the work we present here analyzes, questions, and contextualizes, while fundamentally registering the importance of, an emerging industry with digital participation and citizenship at its core. To quote from Tony Kushner's (1995, 290) *Angels in America* as it anticipates the end of the AIDS crisis, "The world only spins forward. We will be [digital] citizens. The time has come."

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