PLATFORMS, POWER, & PRECARITY IN THE CREATOR ECONOMY

Spring 2024

Instructor: Dr. Brooke Erin Duffy
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Department of Communication
478 Mann Library Building

Course Meeting: Wednesdays, 11:15-1:45 PM

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines the intersection of media, technology, and society through a critical exploration of the digital creator economy. Though so-called "creators" are astonishingly diverse--spanning TikTok comedians, Instagram influencers, YouTube educators, and Onlyfans streamers, among many others--they share a dependence on digital platforms for access to audiences, advertisers, and/or other financial opportunities. But digital platforms are evermore dependent on creators, too. It is in this vein that Big Tech companies are propping up the image of the creator economy as an entrepreneurial Promised Land--one that promises autonomy, flexibility, and self-actualization. Such optimism, however, belies the less auspicious realities of a creator career, wherein accounts of burnout, exploitation, and precarity are rife. How, then, are we to understand the flows of power and agency in the creator economy? We begin by exploring changes and continuities with earlier modes of cultural production; to do so, we draw upon writings on media industries, sociologies of cultural labor, and studies of celebrity and fame. We then explore key themes in critical scholarship in platforms and cultural production, spanning topics such as labor, visibility, and authenticity. Although the course foregrounds mainstream, largely Western creator-centric platforms, students are encouraged to pursue original research that interrogates diverse creator cultures, contexts, and communities of practice.

OBJECTIVES

The learning objectives of this course include to:
1). Understand key approaches to studying digital cultural production from the fields of communication, sociology, and internet studies.
2). Analyze the implications of emergent technologies and political economies of communication for cultural producers and their products.
3). Evaluate and address pressing controversies about the creator economy, including those related to fairness and transparency, labor rights, and bias/inequality.
4). Build critical thinking, research, and writing skills through the production of an original research paper.

GRADING

The course grades will be based upon the following:

1. Final Research Paper (60%)
The paper/detailed research proposal should be at least 20 double-spaced pages and should be written with the goal that it will be suitable for submission as a conference paper or peer-reviewed journal article. In addition, you will be required to present your work-in-progress on the last day of class.

2. Weekly Discussion Contributions (25%)
Beginning in the second week of class, you will be responsible for submitting weekly reading responses on Canvas. These reflections are designed to encourage engagement with the readings and prepare for in-class discussion. For each post, you should provide commentary, questions, and/or criticisms of the assigned readings. I also encourage you to engage in dialogue with your peers. Posts should be written in a coherent, essay format, and should be approximately 800-1000 words in length. Posts are due by noon on the day before class.

3. Course participation/class discussion (15%)
In a seminar, attendance is by nature mandatory. Each student is required not merely to attend, but also to participate in each class session. To participate, each student must have prepared by completing all of the assigned readings by thinking critically about each of those readings.

CLASS POLICIES

Expectations
1. Students are expected to attend all classes and participate in class discussions.
2. Assigned papers and exercises must be submitted on time; they will be marked down if late (5% per late day). Papers must be typewritten with a readable font. Papers should also include proper citations and bibliographies in any recognized academic format (APA, MLA, or Chicago).
3. Because a seminar of this nature can bring up controversial and politically charged issues, it is important that we interact courteously during class discussions and presentations. The classroom should be a safe space for the open exchange of ideas and the exploration of various issues.

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Students with Academic Accommodations
Your access in this course is important to me. Please request your accommodation letter early in the semester, or as soon as you become registered with SDS, so that I have adequate time to arrange your approved academic accommodations. Once SDS approves your accommodation letter, it will be emailed to both you and me. Please follow up with me to discuss the necessary logistics of your accommodations. If you experience any access barriers in this course, such as with printed content, graphics, online materials, or any communication barriers; reach out to me or SDS right away. If you need an immediate accommodation, please speak with me after class or send an email message to me and SDS at sds_cu@cornell.edu.

Statement of Inclusivity and Respect
Each student in this course is expected to contribute to an inclusive and respectful class environment. Students of all backgrounds including gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and religion are to be treated fairly and with honesty, integrity, and respect. Civil discourse, reasoned thought, sustained discussion, and constructive engagement without degrading, abusing, harassing, or silencing others is required of all students in this class.

Academic Dishonesty and Gen AI

ALL WORK MUST BE YOUR OWN and MUST BE UNIQUE TO THIS CLASS (not completed   in/for another class).

Each student in this course is expected to abide by the Cornell University Code of Academic Integrity. Any student in this class suspected of plagiarism or cheating on writing assignments will have a primary hearing. If found guilty, the student will receive a failing grade on the assignment in question and a reduction in the overall course grade, and the results of the hearing will be reported to the CALS Academic Integrity Board. Visit the University Academic Integrity website for further information.

It is a violation of university policy to misrepresent work that you submit or exchange with your instructor by characterizing it as your own, such as submitting responses to assignments that do not acknowledge the use of generative AI tools (i.e., ChatGPT). Please feel free to reach out to me with any questions you may have about the use of generative AI tools before submitting any content that has been substantially informed by these tools."

Classroom Privacy
Each person in this class is expected to respect the principles of academic freedom for instructors and classmates and will maintain the privacy of the classroom environment, as outlined in Cornell's S20 Commitment to Academic Integrity, Equitable Instruction, Trust, and Respect. This commitment to building respect and trust in the classroom means members of this class will not: record, photograph, or share online any interactions that involve classmates or any member of the teaching team. Students will also respect the intellectual property rights of the instructor, and will not share or otherwise make accessible any course materials to anyone not enrolled in the course, without the instructor's written permission. This policy is not meant to restrict students' ability to use classroom recordings in ways beneficial to their learning. Students who may benefit from recorded lectures and lecture playback, including students who use English as an additional language or who have accommodations from SDS, should speak to the course instructor to maintain transparency and trust in the classroom. Students approved to record lectures are expected to maintain the respect and privacy of the learning environment, as stated above. Students will also not enable anyone not enrolled in the course to participate in any activity that is associated with the course. Exceptions to this require the instructor's written permission.

SCHEDULE (instructor reserves the right to amend for pedagogical purposes)
✧denotes reading will be available on Canvas

Jan 24 Course Introduction: Definitions and Debates

✧Bishop, S. (2021). Name of the game. *Real Life Mag*, June 14. Retrieved from: https://reallifemag.com/name-of-the-game/

✧Florida, R. (2022). The rise of the creator economy. Retrieved from: https://about.fb.com/news/2022/11/exploring-the-potential-of-the-creator-economy/ (skim)

✧Harwell, D. & Lorenz, T. (2023). Millions work as content creators. In official records, they barely exist. *The Washington Post*, October 23. Retrieved from

https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/10/26/creator-economy-influencers-youtubers-social-media/

✧Jennings, R. (2022). I'm a creator. You're a creator. We're all creators. *Vox*, February 22. Retrieved from https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22939754/how-to-become-a-content-creator-economy

✧Silva, C. (2023). How generative AI will affect the creator economy. *Mashable*. Retrieved from: https://mashable.com/article/ai-chatgpt-influencer-creator-economy

Further Reading
Jin, Li. (2022). The creator economy needs a middle class." *Harvard Business Review*, December 17, 2020. https://hbr.org/2020/12/the-creator-economyneeds-a-middle-class.

Lorenz, T. (2023). Extremely online: The untold story of fame, influence, and power on the internet. *Simon and Schuster*.

Jan 31 Orienting Frameworks: Media Industries

Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. (2019). *Social media entertainment: The new intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York University Press. Introduction, Chapters 1-3.

✧Hesmondhalgh, D. (2019). Have digital communication technologies democratized the media industries? In: Curran, J and Hesmondhalgh, D, (eds.) *Media and Society* (pp. 101-120). Bloomsbury Academic.

Herbert, D., Lotz, A. D., & Punathambekar, A. (2020). *Media industry studies*. John Wiley & Sons. Introduction and Chapter 1.

Further Reading

Deuze, M. (2013). *Media work*. London: Polity Press..

Hesmondhalgh, D. (2018). *The cultural industries.* London: Sage.

Holt, J., & Perren, A. (Eds.). (2011). *Media industries: History, theory, and method*. John Wiley & Sons.

Morris, J. W., & Powers, D. (2015). Control, curation and musical experience in streaming music services. *Creative Industries Journal*, *8*(2), 106-122.

Turow, J. (1997). *Media systems in society: Understanding industries, strategies, and power*. Longman Publishing Group.

Feb 7 Orienting Frameworks: Sociologies of Cultural Production and Labor
Guest Lecture (Zoom): David Craig, Ph.D., University of Southern California

✧Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production*. NY: Columbia University Press, (pp. 29-73.

✧Gill, R., & Pratt, A. (2008). In the social factory? Immaterial labor, precariousness and cultural work. *Theory, culture & society, 25* (7-8), 1-30.

McRobbie, A. (2018). *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. John Wiley & Sons. Introduction, Chapters 1-2.

✧Neff, G., Wissinger, E., & Zukin, S. (2005). Entrepreneurial labor among cultural producers: "Cool" jobs in "hot" industries. *Social Semiotics*, 15(3), 307-334.

<u>Further Reading</u>

Conor, B., Gill, R. & Taylor, S., Eds. (2015). *Gender and creative labor*. *The Sociological Review*, 63.

Hong, R. (2022). *Passionate work: Endurance after the good life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Siciliano, M. L. (2021). *Creative control: The ambivalence of work in the culture industries*. Columbia University Press.

Sobande, F., Hesmondhalgh, D., & Saha, A. (2023). Black, Brown and Asian cultural workers, creativity and activism: The ambivalence of digital self-branding practices. *The Sociological Review*, 00380261231163952.

Feb 14 Orienting Frameworks: Celebrity Studies and Fame

Abidin, C. (2018). *Internet celebrity: Understanding fame online*. Emerald Publishing Limited. Chapters 1-2.

✧Hearn, A., & Schoenhoff, S. (2015). From celebrity to influencer: Tracing the diffusion of celebrity value across the data stream. In P. David Marshall & Redmond, S. (Eds). *A Companion to Celebrity*, 194-212. Wiley.

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

✧Senft, T. (2008). *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*. London: Peter Lang.Introduction and Chapter 1.

<u>Further Reading</u>

Khamis, S. et al. (2017). Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2), 191-208.

Grindstaff, L., & Murray, S. (2015). Reality celebrity: Branded affect and the emotion economy. *Public culture*, *27*(1), 109-135.

Marshall, P. D. (2014). *Celebrity and power: Fame in contemporary culture*. University of Minnesota Press.

Raun, T. (2018). Capitalizing intimacy: New subcultural forms of micro-celebrity strategies and affective labour on YouTube. *Convergence*, *24*(1), 99-113.

Feb 21 Orienting Frameworks: Platforms and Platformization

✧Burgess, J. (2021) Platform Studies. In Cunningham, S. & Craig, D. (Eds.) *Creator Culture: An introduction to global social media entertainment* (pp. 21-38). New York: New York University Press.

✧Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of 'platforms'. *New media & society*, *12*(3), 347-364.

✧Kaye, D. B. V., Chen, X., & Zeng, J. (2021). The co-evolution of two Chinese mobile short video apps: Parallel platformization of Douyin and TikTok. *Mobile Media & Communication*, *9*(2), 229-253.

✧Poell, T., Nieborg, D. B., & Duffy, B. E. (2021). *Platforms and cultural production*. London: Polity. Introduction.

<u>Further Reading</u>

Arriagada, A., & Ibáñez, F. (2020). "You need at least one picture daily, if not, you're dead": Content creators and platform evolution in the social media ecology. *Social Media + Society*, *6*(3), 2056305120944624.

Helmond, A. (2015). The platformization of the web: Making web data platform ready. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 2056305115603080.

Nielsen, R. K., & Ganter, S. A. (2022). *The power of platforms: Shaping media and society*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Steinberg, M., Zhang, L., & Mukherjee, R. (2024). Platform capitalisms and platform cultures. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13678779231223544.

Feb 28 Key Topics: Infrastructure, Governance, Economics
Guest Lecture (Zoom): Prof. Thomas Poell, University of Amsterdam

✧Caplan, R, and Gillespie, T. (2020). Tiered governance and demonetization: The shifting terms of labor and compensation in the platform economy. *Social Media + Society*: 1–13.

✧Kumar S. (2019). The algorithmic dance: YouTube's Adpocalypse and the gatekeeping of cultural content on digital platforms. *Internet Policy Review*, 8(2). <u>https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.2.1417</u>

✧Poell, T., Nieborg, D. B., & Duffy, B. E. (2021). *Platforms and cultural production*. London: Polity Press. Chapters 2-4.

<u>Further Reading</u>

Gorwa, R., Binns, R., & Katzenbach, C. (2020). Algorithmic content moderation: Technical and political challenges in the automation of platform governance. *Big Data & Society*, 7(1), 2053951719897945. https://doi.org/10.1177/ 2053951719897945

Postigo, H. (2016). The socio-technical architecture of digital labor: Converting play into YouTube money. *New Media & Society, 18*(2), 332-349.

Rieder, B., Borra, E., Coromina, Ò., & Matamoros-Fernández, A. (2023). Making a living in the creator economy: A large-scale study of linking on YouTube. *Social Media + Society*, 9(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231180628

Shtern, J., & Hill, S. (2021). The political economy of sponsored content and social media entertainment production. In *Creator culture: An introduction to global social media entertainment*.

Mar 6 Key Topics: Labor and Precarity
Guest Lecture (Zoom): Zöe Glatt, Ph.D., Microsoft Research

✧Duffy, B. E., Pinch, A., Sannon, S., & Sawey, M. (2021). The nested precarities of creative labor on social media. *Social Media + Society*, *7*(2), 20563051211021368.

✧Drenten, J., Gurrieri, L., & Tyler, M. (2020). Sexualized labour in digital culture: Instagram influencers, porn chic and the monetization of attention. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *27*(1), 41-66.

✧Glatt, Z. (2021). "We're all told not to put our eggs in one basket": Uncertainty, precarity and cross-platform labor in the online video influencer industry. *International Journal of Communication. 16(2022), 3853–3871*.

✧Mehta, S. (2019). Precarity and new media: Through the lens of Indian creators. *International Journal of Communication*, *13*, 5548-5567.

Further Reading

Gregersen, A., & Ørmen, J. (2023). The output imperative: Productivity and precarity on YouTube. Information, Communication & Society, 26(7), 1363-1380.

Jarrett, K. (2022). *Digital labor*. London: Polity Press.

Lin, J. (2023). *Chinese creator economies: Labor and bilateral creative workers*. New York: New York: NYU Press.

Terranova, T. (2000). Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy. *Social Text* 18(2), 33-58.

Van Doorn, N. (2017). Platform labor: on the gendered and racialized exploitation of low-income service work in the 'on-demand'economy. Information, communication & society, 20(6), 898-914.

Mar 13 Key Topics: Algorithms, In/Visibility and Metrics

✧Bishop, S. (2020). Algorithmic experts: Selling algorithmic lore on YouTube. *Social Media + Society*, *6*(1), 2056305119897323.

✧Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media & Society*, *21*(4), 895-913.

Hearn, A. (2010) Structuring feeling: web 2.0, online ranking and rating, and the digital "reputation" economy. Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization 10(3–4): 421–438.
✧Mears, A. (2023). Bringing Bourdieu to a content farm: Social media production fields and the cultural economy of attention. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(3), 20563051231193027.

<u>Further Reading</u>

Bucher, T. (2012). Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on facebook. *New Media & Society*, 14(7), 1164-1180.

Christin, A., & Lewis, R. (2021). The Drama of metrics: Status, spectacle, and resistance among YouTube drama creators." *Social Media + Society* 7(1).

Gandini, A. (2016). Digital work: Self-branding and social capital in the freelance knowledge economy. *Marketing Theory*, 16(1), 123–141.

Harris, B. C., Foxman, M., & Partin, W. C. (2023). "Don't make me ratio you again": How political influencers encourage platformed political participation. *Social Media + Society*, *9* (2). https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1177/20563051231177944

Jiménez-Martínez, C., & Edwards, L. (2023). The promotional regime of visibility: Ambivalence and contradiction in strategies of dominance and resistance. *Communication and the Public*, 8(1), 14-28.

Mar 20 Key Topics: Identity, Authenticity, Creativity

✧Evans, J. M., & Baym, N. K. (2022). The audacity of clout (chasing): Digital strategies of Black youth in Chicago diy Hip-Hop. *International Journal of Communication*, *16*, 19.

Hund, E. (2023). *The influencer industry: The quest for authenticity on social media*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<u>Further Reading</u>

Arriagada, A., & Bishop, S. (2021). Between commerciality and authenticity: The Imaginary of social media influencers in the platform economy. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 14(4), 568–586. https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcab050

Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic™: The politics of ambivalence in brand culture*. New York University Press.

Hearn, A. (2008). Meat, Mask, Burden: Probing the contours of the branded self. *Journal of consumer culture*, *8*(2), 197-217.

Homant, E., & Sender, K. (2019). Queer immaterial labor in beauty videos by LGBTQ-identified YouTubers. *International journal of communication*, 13, 19.

Serazio, M. (2023). *The authenticity industries: Keeping it 'real'* in media, culture, and politics. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

March 27: Key Topics: Audiences, Intimacy, and Fandom

Baym, N. K. (2018). *Playing to the crowd: Musicians, audiences, and the intimate work of connection*. New York University Press.

✦Maddox, J. (2020). What do creators and viewers owe to each other? Microcelebrity, reciprocity, and transactional tingles in the ASMR YouTube community. *First Monday*, 26(1).

Zhai, H., & Wang, W. Y. (2023). Fans' practice of reporting: A study of the structure of data fan labor on Chinese social media. *International Journal of Communication*, *17*, 22.

Further Reading

Abidin, C. (2015). Communicative Intimacies: Influencers and Perceived Interconnectedness. Ada, 8, 1-16.

Hair, L. (2021). Friends, not ATMs: Parasocial relational work and the construction of intimacy by artists on Patreon. *Sociological Spectrum*, 41(2), 196–212. https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173. 2021.1875090

Kanai, (2019). Gender and relatability in digital culture: Managing affect, intimacy and value. Palgrave McMillan.

✦O'Meara, V., Hodson, J., Jacobson, J., & Gruzd, A. (2024). Just being a bit bitchy: The gendered valences of online anti-social behavior on *Tattle Life*.

Richter, V., & Ye, Z. (2023). Influencers' Instagram imaginaries as a global phenomenon: Negotiating precarious interdependencies on followers, the platform environment, and commercial expectations. *Convergence*, 13548565231178918.

Apr 3:   No Class-Spring Break

Apr 10 New Directions: Inequity, Invisibility, and other Job Perils
Guest Lecture (Zoom): Angèle Christin, Ph.D., Stanford University

✦Are, C., & Briggs, P. (2023). The emotional and financial impact of de-platforming on creators at the margins. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(1), 20563051231155103.

✧Christin, A., & Lu, Y. (2023). The influencer pay gap: Platform labor meets racial capitalism. *New Media & Society*, 14614448231164995.

✧Meisner, C. (2023). Networked responses to networked harassment? Creators' coordinated management of "hate raids"on Twitch. *Social Media + Society*, 9(2), 20563051231179696

✧Thomas, K., Kelley, P. G., Consolvo, S., Samermit, P., & Bursztein, E. (2022, April). "It's common and a part of being a content creator": Understanding How Creators Experience and Cope with Hate and Harassment Online. In *Proceedings of the 2022 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1-15).

Further Reading

Christian, A. J., Day, F., Díaz, M., & Peterson-Salahuddin, C. (2020). Platforming intersectionality: Networked solidarity and the limits of corporate social media. *Social Media + Society*, *6*(3), 2056305120933301.

Gray, K. L. (2017). They're just too urban": Black gamers streaming on Twitch. *Digital Sociologies*, *1*, 355-368.

Jane, E. A. (2018). Gendered cyberhate as workplace harassment and economic vandalism. *Feminist Media Studies*, *18*(4), 575-591.

Rauchberg, J. S. (2022). #Shadowbanned: Queer, trans, and disabled creator responses to algorithmic oppression on TikTok. In P. Pain (Ed.), LGBTQ digital cultures (pp. 196–209). Routledge.

Apr 17* NO CLASS *(Brooke will be at media industries conference)*

Apr 24 New Directions: Politics, Resistance, and the Future

✧Craig, D. & Cunningham, S. (2023). With the end of the Hollywood Strike, the creator economy is the next frontier of organized labor. T*he Conversation*, December. Retrieved from: https://theconversation.com

✧Patel, N. (2021). How Fuck You Pay Me is empowering creators. *The Verge*, September. Retrieved from: https://www.theverge.com/22684237/fuck-you-pay-me-lindsey-lee-lugrin-decoder-interview

✧Steele, C. K. (2018). Black bloggers and their varied publics: The everyday politics of black discourse online. *Television & New Media*, *19*(2), 112-127.

Siciliano, M. L. (2023). A politics of judgment?: Alienation and platformized creative labor. *International Journal of Communication*, *17*, 20.

✧Wellman, M. L. (2022). Black squares for Black lives? Performative allyship as credibility maintenance for social media influencers on Instagram. *Social Media+ Society*, *8*(1), 20563051221080473.

Further Reading

Glatt, Z., & Banet-Weiser, S. (2021). Productive ambivalence, economies of visibility and the political potential of feminist YouTubers. Creator culture: An introduction to global social media entertainment, 39-56.

O'Meara, V. (2019). Weapons of the chic: Instagram influencer engagement pods as practices of resistance to Instagram platform labor. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4), 2056305119879671.

Pham, M.H.T. (2015) "I click and post and breathe, waiting for others to see what I see": On #FeministSelfies, outfit photos, and networked vanity, *Fashion Theory*, 19:2, 221-241, DOI: 10.2752/175174115X14168357992436

Grohmann, R., & Corpus Ong, J. (2024). Disinformation-for-Hire as Everyday Digital Labor: Introduction to the Special Issue. *Social Media+ Society*, *10*(1), 20563051231224723.

Scharff, C. (2023). Are we all influencers now? Feminist activists discuss the distinction between being an activist and an influencer. *Feminist Theory*, 14647001231201062.

May 1: Presentations