

Research Article

Anthony Fung*, Milan Ismangil, Wei He and Shule Cao

If I'm not Streaming, I'm not Earning: Audience Relations and Platform Time on Douyin

<https://doi.org/10.1515/omgc-2022-0001>

Received January 7, 2022; accepted May 22, 2022; published online June 14, 2022

Abstract

Purpose: This article explores how platforms reorganize our sense of everyday life. The platformization of everyday life means a changing relation to what we do in our daily lives, not only in China, but in every country in which digital platforms are becoming more relevant by the day. Using TikTok in China as our point of departure, we discuss the role of platform time and the abstracted audience.

Design/methodology/approach: This study is a collaboration between Douyin of ByteDance, whose headquarters are in Beijing, and a team of researchers. Users with more than 10,000 followers were identified so as to select users who had sufficient activities and strong motivation to operate their short video channel. A survey questionnaire was sent to these users during one week in July 2019, and 2375 users responded to the survey. For this paper, after briefly reading the survey results, we selected 50 users for in-depth interviews. The users gave their consent to disclose their identity. In the process, ByteDance helped contact these users.

Findings: Based on the data, we discuss two concepts, abstract audiences and platform time, which helped us to understand platform–labor relations. We argue that while there is the illusion that audiences are closer than ever to the content creator in terms of engagement, at the same time, they are abstracted through platform analytics, meaning that they are reduced to statistics provided to content creators.

Article note: This article underwent double-blind peer review.

***Corresponding author: Anthony Fung**, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong, E-mail: anthonyfung@cuhk.edu.hk

Milan Ismangil, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Wei He, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, Beijing, China

Shule Cao, Tsinghua University, Beijing, Beijing, China

Originality/value: Rather than being liberated, creators are restricted by a new form of time that offers the possibilities of freedom within the confines of the platform. Rather than having fixed working hours, creators are self-regulating as streaming hours and upload times demand certain patterns to increase one's following and make a living, while as creators, they must also try to understand their audience and the platform algorithm.

Keywords: TikTok, Douyin, platformization, China, algorithm, platforms, digital labor, influencers

1 Introduction

What is the primary motivation for the creation of content among some of the top content creators on the Chinese social media platform Douyin? Based on interviews with fifty high profile Douyin creators in China, we found that the pursuit for independence is the primary motivation for content creation. Rather than becoming (micro) celebrities or wealthy individuals, it is stable income and (labor) independence that is most sought after.

Rather than liberating users and creators however, platforms restrict them in different ways. We discuss two concepts, abstract audiences and platform time, which helped us understand platform–labor relations. We argue that while there is the illusion that audiences are closer than ever to the content creator in terms of engagement, at the same time, they are abstracted through platform analytics, meaning that they are reduced to statistics provided to content creators. Platform time is a new form of time that offers the possibilities of freedom within the confines of the platform. Rather than having fixed working hours, the interviewees noted that they were self-regulating as streaming hours and upload times demand certain patterns to increase one's following and make a living, while at the same time, as creators, they have to try to understand their audience and the platform algorithm.

Abstracted audiences refer to the audience of platforms, which like the platforms themselves, are always on. The audience never leaves. Rather than being engaged with something at set moments (a concert, book signing, television schedule, etc.), the audience is always present on platforms. The abstraction of audiences is not a new phenomenon as institutions in a sense have created the television audience (Ang 2006). The classic models of audience as agent, mass, or outcome (Webster 1998) might still apply on social media. What is different, however, is that these models are now generated instantly and constantly for individual users and creators. Through comments and subscriptions, the platform

creator is constantly aware of their audience and their relationship to the audience. Instant feedback presents the content creator with a dilemma: Do I use these tools to shape the content according to possible audience preferences, or do I follow my own path? Creative isolation is more difficult for the more traditional content creators while impossible for live streamers as constant feedback is the norm. Each power user has become a miniature media company without being privileged to the same amount of information or control that traditional media companies might have.

2 Changing Concepts of Audiences and Time in Platform Labor

“What do you think was the reason you grew to one million fans these two months?”

“No idea, I am also very curious about it” (Interviewee 431).

Platformization, Poell et al. (2019, p. 6) note, “leads to the (re-)organization of cultural practices around platforms, while these practices simultaneously shape a platform’s institutional dimensions”. Lin and De Kloet (2019) discussed platformization in the context of China, arguing that it produces an “unlikely” creative class, enabling Chinese youth outside of the establishment to become creative workers. We are currently in a process of platformization as platforms come to dominate nearly every aspect of our lives, from how we navigate ourselves in the outside world, to how we buy food, talk to people, find romance, plan holidays, and find jobs. With streaming technologies and platforms, a new chapter in the commodification of everyday life has begun. It is now possible through livestreams to stream one’s entire life online as everyday activities, such as walking or gardening, are monetized. In the case of consumer hobbies, such as video games and popular culture, a double process of commodification occurs, as the content creator must first consume, after which their content is consumed by fans. Consumer hobbies (video games, films, and entertainment) are consumed by the streamer who then “sells” their product (streaming content and affiliated merchandizing) to the viewer.

The spread of the Internet and mobile phones has led to an “atomization” in modern society as cultural industries have become dominated by the information technology (IT) sector (Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2018). This represents an evolution from domestic household consumption to individual and targeted mobile consumption patterns seen on platforms, such as Facebook and TikTok. This means that platforms are shaped by the individualized masses. Platforms are not neutral entities; they actively shape content. This can happen through more

passive choices, such as website design and algorithms (recommended videos, searching keywords), or through more active engagement, such as direct content moderation, content restrictions, or the promotion of certain accounts (Gillespie 2018).

2.1 Wanghong and Platform Micro Celebrities or Daily Laborers?

With the growth of the Internet in China, a new phenomenon is the emergence of *Wanghong*, a term used for Internet celebrities. As many of the Douyin creators we interviewed would qualify as Wanghong, a brief explanation is in order. In China, Wanghong (網紅) is a term used for those who have become famous traditionally or through the Internet. They are savvy people who manage to make money off the Internet, similar to influencers in the English language, who use social media to promote a specific lifestyle and garner a profit through marketing and merchandizing. The term refers to both established traditional celebrities and Internet celebrities. Wanghongs can range from micro-celebrities to those who made it big on the Internet and influence the wider social discourse (Xu and Zhao 2019). Despite the draw of celebrity culture, becoming famous does not seem to be the main goal for many creators in China as Li and de Kloet (2019) explained in the case of Kuaishou (快手), another Chinese social media app. They noted how users and creators aim to become self-sufficient within their means instead of aiming high toward achieving superstardom. This perspective was also corroborated by our interviews. It is a more down-to-earth goal, where social media is used simply to sustain oneself. This is especially the case in rural China, where there are fewer economic opportunities often necessitating that people move to cities.

While social media is not always a way to become rich and famous, it could also be an alternative way to support oneself. Discussing the crowdfunding website Patreon, Regner (2020) noted how crowdfunding can take the form of monthly voluntary donations. On that platform, patrons might provide a creator with a valuable, more direct way of funding than advertising, which is less certain in terms of income. Advertising could even have a negative impact on the creator's reputation because their audience might be opposed to commercials. Patreon functions as mass patronage; instead of one Maecenas, there are many spread all over the world, which are anonymous to the content creator. These digital or hidden patrons fund or donate their money to support the content they enjoy, often gaining access to special donator-only content. Discussing fame versus monetary gain, Fietkiewicz et al. (2018) noted how streamers are motivated differently, some pursuing fame while older streamers in general aspire toward financial gain.

Considering platform labor in this way, the matter of success is relative. Living off one's online content is a form of success.

The ability to live online, be online, and earn online, either through democratized mass patronage or through advertising and monetization that is offered by platforms, has become an option for many people. While the focus of platforms is often on the superstars who attract imitators who aspire to be like them, we should not forget that there are many who simply use these platforms as a day-to-day job to secure their own labor independence. Our findings show that the stability of labor and income is a critical issue.

2.2 Labor Time, Free Time, and Platform Time

If one earns a living by means of platforms, they rely on platform time which means they spend a lot of time on the platforms to achieve their goals. Creators are thinking in platform time, similarly to how we might plan our day around television or radio broadcasts, as now platform time influences our day-to-day existence. As the data from our interviews demonstrate, it is not enough to simply upload; rather, constant uploading is necessary to maintain oneself in the affective social media economy (Woodcock and Johnson 2019). Platform time differs per creator, and for streamers, platform time is the amount of time they spend streaming on the platform, which is similar to how a worker spends time at the workplace. For those who post content, platform time influences how their content will be received by the platform. Creators will try to determine the optimal time to post their content and the best way to game the algorithm and increase their audience share.

While content creators gain a certain independence over their own time as they dictate their own work and free time, this time has simultaneously become blurred. If all time is potential earning time, then what does this mean for a content creator's own independence since they theoretically would be always "on the clock"? This brings us to Adorno (2001) who noted the "razor sharp division" between free time and work time. He argued that free time should not resemble work time in order to (presumably) be able to work more efficiently in work time. Free time is something that is not in a person's control; it is defined by working time and organized by the culture (leisure) industry. "Organized freedom is compulsory", Adorno argued, because it is arranged by the larger socioeconomic structures of society (in Adorno's case the culture industry). Capitalist productivity both increases and commodifies "disposable time" (Fisher and Fuchs 2015). As disposable or leisure time gains earning potential, the concept of work changes.

Online social life is a new site for commercial surveillance where work and play are molded together to be exploited by corporations (Scholz 2013). Work, according to Krempf and Beyes (2011, p. 469), “can be understood as the contradictory relationship of meaning and function from the moment it stopped being postulated a forced necessity and came to be seen as a potentially satisfying mode of fulfilment”. If we consider platform labor as meaning making, which, we found, the interviews certainly supported, then we can recast this as a type of digital labor.

Considering different approaches to the economy and well-being, Hesmondhalgh (2017) discussed the idea of a moral economy, well-being (flourishing), and capabilities. This corresponds to Keat’s (2000) idea of media as a meta-good/discourse, meaning that media can “develop people’s capacities to make judgments about the nature and possibility of wellbeing”. (p. 211). This is the definition of flourishing as being capable (hence, having capabilities) “to do certain things, should they choose to”, and people’s capabilities to flourish by giving an account of themselves (with their own voices). This is independence in two ways, firstly, independence of time, as people are allowed and able to determine their own hours and what they do with those hours. Secondly, it is independence of vision or creative freedom, where one is free to follow whichever direction seems fruitful. Thus, the continuous labor of websites has shifted to the need to maintain a social media presence.

The ubiquitous nature of streaming allows the everyday to be projected online and, if popular enough, transforms it into a commodity. This has led to a new kind of economy that Scolari (2019) termed the “inspirational economy”, in which connections, comparison between users, continual investment by the creator, and novelty are paramount for creators to survive on these platforms. Terranova (2000) noted how these new types of labor form part of the process by which knowledge, culture, and affect are new sites for the extraction of monetary value. According to Terranova, the Internet has created a more flexible workforce with free exploitable labor that is easily accessible worldwide. These workers perform immaterial labor that is not specific to any class formation.

3 Case Study: The Chinese Power Users of Douyin [抖音]

Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, is a short video and livestream app launched in 2016 that allows users to record videos with a maximum length of 1 min. Within the app, there are numerous ways to edit videos, which differentiates it from previous video apps. As of February 2020, Douyin had around 400 million

daily active users in China, thus making it one of the most popular apps in the world. Douyin's Western version, TikTok, enjoys similar popularity; it was the sixth most downloaded application (app) from 2010 to 2020 (Rayome 2019). TikTok has been the subject of several controversies, especially regarding privacy and data collection (Gaouette and Browne 2019).

In China, mobile phone Internet services are used at a scale not seen in any other country, where even rural markets feature printed QR codes for easy payment to e-wallet accounts. In this context, the development of streaming services has been massively popular, and China features many unique streaming websites and apps, such as Douyin, HuoMao (火貓), and Bilibili. For a long time, the Chinese Internet has been contained within China, with little success outside of the diaspora of apps and software developed in that country. This has been changing, and the success of TikTok as one of the most downloaded apps in Europe and North America in 2018 shows how Chinese Internet companies like ByteDance are going global. This is also true for infrastructure, video games, or e-commerce businesses, such as Tencent (*League of Legends*, WeChat), NetEase, and Alibaba (Alipay). In China, the use of and familiarity with social media apps is a way to show one's modern lifestyle (Lu and Lu 2019; Wang 2016). Social media apps, such as QQ, Weibo, and WeChat, are used by people to distinguish themselves as being modern. As one app replaces the other, keeping up to date with the latest and greatest serves to align oneself with a modern, fashionable identity.

The interviewees most often desired stability. Rather than becoming famous or rich, most of them said they simply wanted to be independent, free to continue their pursuits. The new possibilities of a combination of advertisements, mass patronage, and fan sales lead to new interactions between the creators and their audience. Perhaps labor is the wrong word for the type of activities described in our interviews. Everything from farming to photography, animation, and playing video games for a living somehow fall under this umbrella term. Under the conditions provided by Douyin, according to the interviewees, time and effort spent did not directly translate into money or the number of fans gained. Most of them stated that independence and value or belief in their own work were the most important factors for them as creators. Despite the conditions, this shows that they are flourishing because they can use their own skills and talents to make a living. We found that for most of the interviewees, the positive developments of non-material goods evolved from the creators' passion projects and that they spread their excitement and passion via the platform.

Local conditions to flourish have emerged because platforms such as Douyin have suddenly become a viable option for people to make a living. Precarity is still a major issue, however. The argument can be made that before there were platforms, creative workers had to deal with a market that could be as unclear or vague

as the algorithms that dominate these platforms. Unlike previously, platform creators must now contend with abstract mathematics and technologies to have a voice. On a practical level, they need to be able to understand and engage with the platform and its obscure inner workings to profit from it.

3.1 Method

This study is based on 50 interviews held with some of the top Douyin users in China. Douyin is the first made-from-China short video app that has enjoyed widespread success outside the Chinese Internet (Yang and Jing 2019). Worldwide, it is popular primarily among youth, with 800 million users in 2019, of which 40% were under the age of 20 (Mohsin 2020). The popularity of Douyin in China demonstrates how that country's economy is changing as it moves toward digital, intangible ways of being as well as digital ways of making a living. Its explosive popularity in China shows the spread of and integration with the digital environment in a country with the world's largest number of Internet users. Similar to streaming or video platforms, such as Twitch or YouTube, Douyin allows its users to earn money from commercials, sponsorships, and product placement. The app has built-in market integration, which allows users to buy the products seen in videos through either direct sales links or product placements within the platform itself.

This study was a collaboration between Douyin of ByteDance, headquartered in Beijing, and a team of researchers. Based on data from ByteDance, we combined hashtags of short videos and categorized them into 10 different occupational clusters; Beauty, Health, Education, Food, Travel, Pets, Animation, Fashion, Talent, and Celebrities. Excluding commercial corporate and inactive accounts, we identified content creators with more than 10,000 followers so as to select creators who have had sufficient activities and strong motivation to operate their short video channel. This yielded a sample of 121,234 users or content creators. With the help of Douyin, a survey questionnaire was sent to these users during July 2019 with 2375 creators responding. To differentiate them from general users, we will use the term creators to designate them throughout the article.

Fifty creators were selected with their consent for an in-depth interview with ByteDance helping to contact them. The interview focused on interviewees' experience with and opinion about Douyin and why they were committed to posting their videos on Douyin. The interviewees ranged from hobbyists turned professional, to professionals who use Douyin as a client base. The interviewees chosen were those who had spent a considerable amount of time on Douyin and received a significant amount of revenue from the site so that the sample would not

represent the inactive creators or those who participated as a leisure activity. While some creators explained how they earned a living on Douyin—ranging from selling products to receiving commercial fees—others expressed their strong interest in interacting and networking with followers.

3.2 Douyin as a Platform

As a platform, Douyin collapses all categories of content onto a single app. A food blogger in Shanghai and a turnip farmer high in the mountains can coexist on the same platform, operating under the same rules. The time and effort spent between successful Douyin users and creators will therefore differ as there are no clear roads to success. Platforms are not homogenous entities. There are vast differences within platforms as well as among different platforms. It is consequently important not to fall into the trap of flattening all the differences within and among platforms. As the cases in this study show, Douyin is an open space that can host anyone, anywhere, at any time. Creators range from farmers in China's periphery that found an outlet for selling honey to restaurant reviewers who became minor celebrities in their towns. Some people stream their everyday lives, commodifying their entire life, while others use Douyin as a more traditional publishing platform to showcase their work. Despite the idiosyncrasies of the user base, everyone must deal with the logic of the platform. Platforms are a liquid environment; they can change on a whim, taking any shape, at any moment. Interfaces change, as do video editing options in the case of Douyin. A tweak in the algorithm can suddenly nullify the tacit knowledge the creators build up as they try to use the system to their benefit. The interviewees dealt with this in different ways; some admitted they had no idea how or why they became popular. Others attempted to analyze their success and follow what had been successful by trying to ride the algorithmic wave.

3.3 Douyin Creators and the Road toward Independence

"After discovering Douyin, it was entertainment; now it is a profession. It feels very good" (Interviewee 994).

Income instability and investment uncertainty (of time and money) were prevalent themes among the interviewees that used Douyin as their main source of income. Independence, associated with the freedom to do one's own work, was the most prevalent theme in the interviews. Independence was explicitly stated by many interviewees, who said that it was their main reason for continuing with Douyin. Simply put, they wanted the opportunity to be their own boss. The interviewees

preferred their current career path over their previous job because it enabled them to follow their own desires. In addition, they expressed a concern about precariousness, where the element of chance played a significant role. They also emphasized the uncertainty of not knowing why and how one can become successful or not knowing when the demanding work will pay off and the algorithm will choose you to become successful. The interviews showed that many had tried to analyze their own success but it was often felt it was like reading (algorithmic) tea leaves. Some enterprising creators were confident that their success was because they leaped on Douyin as a platform exploding in popularity, seeing it as a way to increase their clientele. Others were surprised by their own success as their use of the platform began as a leisure activity and grew into their full-time source of income. This indicates that success is fickle and income is uncertain. Most creators said that they did not know why they had become popular, or how their advertising income was determined. Nevertheless, dependent on algorithms that sort videos for millions of creators, they try to, either consciously or unconsciously, game the system to ensure their continued success and obtain a stable source of income.

3.4 From Independence to Labor Value

Next to independence is the question of value. What value do the creators consider their work to hold? Many of the creators stated that their satisfaction with their own work was most important to them as it enabled them to express their self-worth. One interviewee noted that it was important to “Express my own value(s)” [Interviewee 849]. The randomness of success however makes it difficult for many to gauge the quality and value of one’s work. This often leads to friction between what is desired by the audience and what the content creators themselves wish to make (Woodcock and Johnson 2019). As we found was often the case, the thing some Douyin creators became popular for was not necessarily the one thing that they felt represented them the best, or what they valued the most. Independence was noted as a major objective for most of those we interviewed, in that they could then decide to focus on what each creator wished to make. This might lead to a path where creators feel they must follow the trends to keep a stable fan base and income, giving up some of their earlier avowed independence to chase what they considered to be (algorithmically) popularity.

Different interviewees had different answers for why they experienced success. Some followed the trends and tried to ride the wave of the moment. Others focused on quality, creativity, or making the best content. Most of the creators shared that they did not know why their first big video was a big success. This can lead to tension between artistic vision and the pursuit for popularity and

independence as the interviewees' relationship to their work was often cited as one of the most important aspects. To make work one is proud of or to express oneself is as important, if not more important, than the audience's reception of the work. However, we do not wish to romanticize this picture. Like artists striving for their creative vision, there can be tension between the content maker and their fans as popular creations might not necessarily be the work that the creator is most proud of. One interviewee said:

The (video) with the best outcome I was not most satisfied with. The one I was most satisfied with on the contrary had only a few views. This could be because of my age compared to the users. The composition of my fan group is not really the same. What I might like, they might dislike (Interviewee 733).

The tension involving the platform, the popularity of the work, and the integrity of the content creator was often noted as an issue. The interviewees were conscious of the positive and negative aspects of using the platform. In trying to influence the platform algorithm, one interviewee attempted to determine the best method of release new videos: "The first thing I thought of was the release time, because the people who like to watch travel videos are usually young people, and I also saw on Douyin that my fans range from age 18 to 30" (Interviewee 1733). Learning to deal with the unstated rules of the platform market is an important step for many creators. With these new options also come new skills, such as video editing, which make up the new skillset required to make a living on platforms.

3.5 Douyin as Marketplace, as Dream Job, as Regular Job, as Competition

Most of the creators we interviewed use Douyin to sustain themselves. The relationship to the platform differed greatly among the creators however, with some treating it like a job, while others considered it to be leisure time that they got paid for. Many interviewees responded positively to the question concerning whether Douyin was their ideal work or ideal work situation. Important motivators for choosing Douyin as a platform included fun, being one's own boss, and pursuing one's own interests and goals. Many said that they had chosen the platform for its popularity and ease of use. Others were more pragmatic. One creator of animation videos used six different platforms to promote their work.

There are many different roads that lead to social media success. However, a distinction must be made between the Douyin creators who rely on the platform and those for whom it is only an addition to their regular occupation. For some, Douyin's popularity is the reason they use the platform to promote themselves or

their products. Others started using Douyin as a leisure activity, which then was transformed into their means of making a living, as one interviewee said, sharing thoughts on their first popular video: “I was surprised, because it (the video) became popular, I only continued to play. After playing for some time, I came to think this platform was especially amazing” (Interviewee 2184). Sharing his experience in becoming popular, another interviewee stated: “After I gained many fans, I had more confidence, so I started to upload nonstop, use the app nonstop” (Interviewee 506). The popularity of the application might also work as a downside as one music performer with 750,000 followers argued, complaining about facing the increasing pressure as the competition on the platform has grown fiercer due to its popularity. Facing extra competition leads to both advantages in terms of potential viewership as well as disadvantages for those trying to make it big.

The pragmatism of using Douyin as a potential marketplace has been noted by other people who run companies outside of the platform. Someone who found a unique angle to benefit from online popularity was a farmer who used his own Douyin popularity to enlarge his customer base. In fact, most of his customers were followers of his Douyin channel. Several photographers we interviewed used Douyin as a promotional tool. Often, this meant following the platform’s algorithmic logic, trying to capture images or videos that might potentially go viral. As one photographer stated: “Whatever is popular, is what I shoot”. We should be careful not to overemphasize the influence of the platform for everyone. Some interviewees stated that success on the platform did not have a monetary impact on them; they simply saw it as a side activity because they earned most of their income through other means. Many creators admitted they were not originally that interested in the platform, and they only paid more attention to it after they became popular.

Using the platform when it becomes popular is a new phenomenon akin to moving to another place where one’s art form might be better received. The audience here is not a specialized one; rather, it is about sheer numbers. In this context, creators go where the most people are and the specific content does not matter. No matter if the creator makes cooking or gaming videos or livestreams or anything in between, the abstracted number of the audience or users of the platform becomes the primary criterion. Rather than audience reception or quality of audience, it is quantity that rules. The underlying assumption here is that the platform audience will watch anything, and it is less to do with what you make but more to do with a kind of fateful choice where you try to ride on the algorithmic wave to success. It further shows that rather than an aspiration that leads to becoming a content creator, it is often simply the result of happenstance, which is not often the case when we compare it with other creative professions, such as

music or theatre, where it is often the result of a lifelong pursuit and training that results in someone becoming successful.

3.6 In Pursuit of Stability: Labor Time and Income

Most of the creators we interviewed were happy with the platform. Douyin was an opportunity to showcase their own skills and values or pursue something that they found to be meaningful. While many caveats are associated with the dominant position of platforms in these labor relationships, many of the full-time users cited their independence as a major factor and reason for continuing their platform labor. While far from Adorno's ideal "free-man" who can decide his own time, independent from the cultivated desire manufactured by the capitalist system, this new development provides a promising alternative to modern forms of labor, or what is described more pessimistically as wage slavery.

Unstable income was frequently cited in the interviews as a major cause of concern. Expressing frustration, one interviewee said: "More and more people who are better than me are joining the platform, so the competition is getting stronger. How to say it? Looking at the income it has not been stable, not stable!" (Interviewee 365). Many were quite practical, and they considered the labor they performed on Douyin as a type of job. However, some noted that a job in which income is uncertain and success is described in terms of the number of views or followers does not directly translate into actual income. Many stated that what they desired most was income and labor stability. As one interviewee who was unsatisfied with his Douyin income argued: "If you gain a lot of fans, you should also gain some income, is not it?" (Interviewee 1588). Although many complained about low or unstable income, others were more than happy with their income from the platform, and they were surprised about their own success. The fact is that much of their income was unknown to the creators themselves, as advertising revenue can differ, which makes it hard to predict future income.

Working hours were also uncertain, according to the interviewees. Some admitted that all their time went toward creating content for Douyin. Of course, this would be highly dependent on the type of content being made; for example, those involved with video games might admit they play the games regardless of whether they are streamed. We found that the number of hours spent livestreaming varied greatly. For some people, it ranged from three to nine hours a day; one person admitted that he streamed nearly every moment of his life. One interviewee who produced content for a small media company focusing on Douyin, stated: "I think every day [I spend] more than 14 hours, [which is] basically all my personal time". For people who described Douyin as a hobby, not a full-time job, using the

platform still dominated their free time. One government worker who considered it a hobby said: “Now using Douyin takes up most of my [spare time]. I use my phone for around six hours every day, most of it on Douyin” (Interviewee 2210).

According to the interviewees, another source of precarity was the government. Many, especially those who do livestreaming, complained about restrictions even though they created content that would spread positive energy. One interviewee asked: “Why are our very positive works, that bring beauty to everyone, being restricted?” (Interviewee 1713). Especially in China, the perceived randomness of the government in terms of censorship and Internet restriction adds another layer of uncertainty to people that make a living online. As previously noted, as a platform, Douyin has become notorious for striving to purify its content by removing “ugly” or “poor” people and demanding certain users within China to not speak their regional languages (Biddle et al. 2020). Nevertheless, censorship is not entirely clear-cut as users and creators can navigate around restrictions, and there have been instances of viral videos featuring people that would have been removed if Douyin did follow the aforementioned guidelines zealously. While the scale of censorship on Douyin has remained unclear, especially compared with other platforms, many creators stated that they still felt it had an impact on the way they engaged and interacted with the platform, as became evident throughout the interviews.

The strong role of the government might explain why Douyin has been outspoken about regulating content. This became particularly controversial when leaked internal documents revealed how moderators are told to remove content that is harmful to “national honor” and national security. More controversy was generated when it was found that Douyin stipulated that it would punish “unattractive” and “impoverished” users (Biddle et al. 2020). While the first guideline is typical for Chinese social media, the second seems to be the first of its kind. By making specific users less noticeable to others by tweaking specific settings in the search algorithm, the platform tries to purify the content it considers to be undesirable, from “ugly people” with too many wrinkles, to houses with cracks in the wall. Another instance of severe moderation occurred with users who livestreamed in Cantonese. They were warned about doing so, and they were asked to speak in Mandarin instead (Wo Xi A Y 2020). An internal report obtained by the Intercept shows how TikTok employees have hosted content on the platform, masquerading as normal users to fill the platform with their videos and pushing them to access people’s video feeds (Biddle et al. 2020).

We would do well to remember, however, that the platform laborers who rely on one platform for most of their income fall under a platform regime that can make users disappear or be made invisible to others at a moment’s notice. Studying Chinese beauty bloggers, Guan (2020) noted that bloggers on Weibo are similar to Uber drivers. Both are platform laborers that rely on an external platform without being

contracted by it (Rosenblat 2016), meaning that they are subject to the rules and algorithms of the platform they exist on. Laboring under these uncertain conditions, relying on the whims of a company, it is important to always remember that, however celebratory many stories of success are, where one person succeeds, thousands fail.

4 Discussion: Audiences and Platform Time

In today's digital platform world, what we do can be easily shared with others, providing the potential for people to build an online community, share things, and even earn an income—an income that comes from a community of patrons, or because of one's allegiance to corporations through advertisements and sponsorships. Because all activities become potential sharing (and therefore earning) activities, all time becomes potential earning time. These developments are not particular to China and hold true elsewhere. How people come to, engage with, and profit from or deal with a certain platform is dependent on their local conditions.

For any creative laborer, the relationship to the audience is important. Aside from attempts at gaming the algorithms, the interviewees noted, trying to understand one's audience is a common strategy to stay relevant on the platform. In the end, it is the audience that sponsors the work either directly through merchandize and subscriptions or indirectly through watching advertisements. On a platform, the relationship between audience and creator has changed. The number of viewers does not necessarily translate into financial success. This idea, we found, was generally accepted as true by most of the creators. Digital platforms often have unclear rules, and the interviewees noted that they must constantly compare themselves with others and constantly upload content to make money. Feedback is instant, and there is the illusion of direct contact with the creator. However, the audience is abstracted through viewing numbers and separation in time and space. As some creators' experiences showed, the relationship with the audience is limited to viewing numbers. If the viewing number goes up, it means they are doing a good job and should continue this style of content, and if it goes down, they should adapt and see what is (algorithmically) popular.

Audiences are abstracted, and there does not seem to be much of a sense of core viewing audience. The audience is interchangeable, and there seems to be little regard for the potential loyalty of an audience as the potential audience now involves all those who use the platform. It was often unclear to creators who their audiences were, and it was often surprising when they found one. As one interviewee noted, his audience skewed much younger than he himself was, leading to different demands for his content. Why and how he was popular with this demographic was unclear. Abstract audiences previously were a tool for major

corporations to gain a sense of their products' success through surveys, business analytics, and such. With the incessant gathering of data on today's platforms, even small individual creators have access to similar kinds of tools that were previously only accessible to major corporations.

Modern streaming technologies have enabled a near complete commodification of time. All time is now potential earning time, and platform affordances enable this by providing different ways of monetization in addition to more traditional merchandizing efforts. Most of the interviewed creators have come to rely on Douyin as their sole source of income. This inevitably leads to questions of uneven power relations and independence of the creators, the terms of services, vague algorithms, and the often total reliance on a single platform to earn income and promote one's work, thus making one's existence more precarious than before. Audiences exist on the platform, and it is questionable if the creators' fan base or followers would follow them to other places, and this creates a situation of uncertainty.

We see an erasure of the distinction between free time and labor time. All time is potential labor time, as corroborated by many interviewees when they considered their own "free time". Even when they were not earning any money from their ventures, some still regarded it as work. This is comparable to creative endeavors where the writing of a book or composing music requires an investment of time before any potential financial reward. However, in the context of digital platforms, what is different is the fact that the (creative) labor expressed on Douyin is remarkably fleeting. It requires constant output to make a living. Yet, these outputs do not enjoy any longevity that is similar to books, movies, or other creative outlets. For many, their labor is tied entirely to the platform; in a sense, they are held hostage by its design.

Contrary to the images of teenagers seeking fame and glory, the interviewees described a reality where people work hard and try to pursue some form of labor independence. Despite the issues of precariousness of labor and the randomness of success, our findings indicate that independence and finding value in one's work is worth striving for and are important motivators for many, more so than becoming the next big thing, which in an age of pandemics and late-stage capitalism, seems a precious thing indeed.

Acknowledgments: The data are from a collaborative research project conducted by ByteDance (Beijing) and the Center for Digital Content and Creative Media at Beijing Normal University, of which the first author is the Director.

Research funding: This research project is funded by a grant from the Research Grant Council of HKSAR (Project no. GRF 14600618) and the Key Fund of the National Social Science Foundation of China: Arts category (18ZD12).

References

- Adorno, Theodor. 2001. Free time. In N. Walker (ed.), *The culture industry*, 187–197. London: Routledge.
- Ang, I. 2006. *Desperately seeking the audience*. London: Routledge.
- Biddle, Sam, Paulo Victor Ribeiro & Tatiana Dias. 2020. *Invisible censorship*. The Intercept.
- Fietkiewicz, Kaja, Isabelle Dorsch, Katrin Scheibe, Franziska Zimmer & Wolfgang G. Stock. 2018. Dreaming of stardom and money: Micro-celebrities and influencers on live streaming services. In G. Meiselwitz (ed.), *Social computing and social media. User experience and behavior*, 10913, 240–253. New York: Springer International Publishing.
- Fisher, Eran & Christian Fuchs. 2015. *Reconsidering value and labour in the digital age*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gaouette, Nicole & Ryan Browne. 2019. *US Army bans soldiers from using TikTok over security worries*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/12/30/politics/army-tiktok-banned/index.html> (accessed 31 December 2019).
- Gillespie, Tarleton. 2018. *Custodians of the internet*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Guan, Zexu.. 2020. Chinese beauty bloggers: Amateurs, entrepreneurs, and platform labour. *Celebrity Studies*. 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2020.1737154>.
- Hesmondhalgh, David. 2017. Capitalism and the media: Moral economy, well-being and capabilities. *Media, Culture & Society* 39(2). 202–218.
- Hesmondhalgh, David & Leslie M. Meier. 2018. What the digitalisation of music tells us about capitalism, culture and the power of the information technology sector. *Information, Communication & Society* 21(11). 1555–1570.
- Keat, Russel. 2000. *Cultural goods and the limits of the market*. New York: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Kreml, Sophie-Thérèse Kreml & Timon Beyes. 2011. Work = work! Work: In defence of play. *Ephemera* 11. 466–481.
- Lin, Jian & Jeroen de Kloet. 2019. Platformization of the unlikely creative class: *Kuaishou* and Chinese digital cultural production. *Social Media + Society* 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119883430>.
- Lu, Xing & Zhicong Lu. 2019. Fifteen seconds of fame: A qualitative study of Douyin, A short video sharing mobile application in China. In G. Meiselwitz (ed.), *Social computing and social media. Design, human behavior and analytics*, 11578, 233–244. New York: Springer International Publishing.
- Mohsin, Maryam. 2020. *10 TikTok statistics that you Need to Know in 2020 [Infographic]*. Oberlo. <https://www.oberlo.com/blog/tiktok-statistics>.
- Poell, Thomas, David Nieborg & José van Dijck. 2019. Platformisation. *Internet Policy Review* 8(4). <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1425>.
- Rayome, Alison Denisco. 2019. *10 most-downloaded apps of the 2010s: Facebook dominates the decade*. Cnet. <https://www.cnet.com/news/10-most-downloaded-apps-of-the-decade-facebook-dominated-2010-2019/>.
- Regner, Tobias. 2020. Crowdfunding a monthly income: An analysis of the membership platform Patreon. *Journal of Cultural Economics* 45(1). 133–142.
- Rosenblat, Alex. 2016. Algorithmic labor and information asymmetries: A case study of uber's drivers. *International Journal of Communication* 10. 3758–3784.
- Scholz, Trebor. 2013. *Digital labor: The Internet as playground and factory*. London: Routledge.

- Scolere, Leah. 2019. Digital inspirational economy: The dialectics of design. *Information, Communication & Society* 24(9). 1192–1211.
- Terranova, Tiziana. 2000. Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy. *Social Text* 18(2). 33–58.
- Wang, Xinyuan. 2016. *Social media in industrial China*. London: UCL Press.
- Webster, James. 1998. The audience. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 42(2). 190–207.
- Woodcock, Jamie & Mark Johnson. 2019. The affective labor and performance of live streaming on Twitch.tv. *Television & New Media* 20(8). 813–823.
- Wo Xi A Y. 2020. Douyin forbids Cantonese broadcasts, are you kidding me??? Yang Cheng Wang. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/UBDqlu-36GkZZIJ3K0wuRg> 我系阿Y (2020, 3.30). 抖音禁止使用粤语直播, 有冇搞错? ? ? 羊城网.
- Xu, Jian & Xinyu Zhao. 2019. Changing platformivity of China's female Wanghong: From anni baobei to zhang dayi. In S. Cai (ed.), *Female celebrities in contemporary Chinese society*, 127–158. Singapore: Springer.
- Yang, Yingzhi & Meng Jing. 2019. *How short video app TikTok became the first Chinese-made app to take the world by storm*. Hong Kong: South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/tech/apps-social/article/3001893/how-short-video-app-tiktok-became-first-chinese-made-app-take>.

Bionotes

Anthony Fung

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong
anthonyfung@cuhk.edu.hk

Anthony Fung is a professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Milan Ismangil

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Milan Ismangil is a writer studying for a PhD at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Shule Cao

Tsinghua University, Beijing, Beijing, China

Shule Cao is an associate professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Tsinghua University, China.

Wei He

Beijing Normal University, Beijing, Beijing, China

Wei He is a professor at the School of Arts and Communication at Beijing Normal University, China.