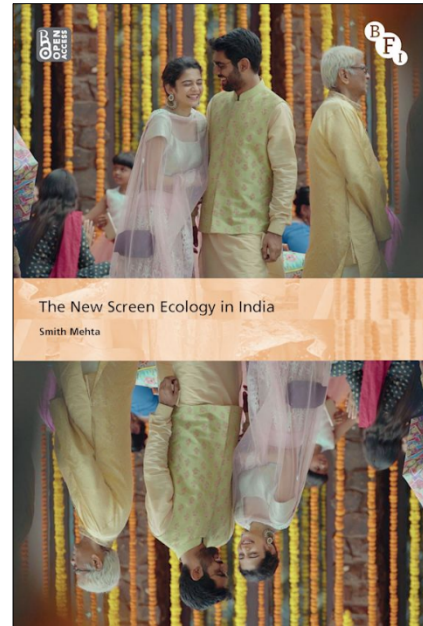Smith Mehta, **The New Screen Ecology in India: Digital Transformation of Media**, London, UK; Bloomsbury, 2023, 184 pp., $31.45 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Bizaa Zeynab Ali
New York University

Smith Mehta's *The **New Screen Ecology in India: Digital Transformation of Media*** skillfully traverses several complicated conceptual intersections of traditional media sociology, platform-portal politics, and societal contestations to tell the story of the "digital transformation" of the Indian screen industries. This book draws attention to shifting creator dynamics and creative labor in contemporary Indian media production with the advent of platforms and portals, and offers an all-encompassing overview of the rich sociology and the multiscalar political economy of the Indian media industry. It highlights the "continuities and disjunctures" between the new and traditional media (p. 119) and the emerging formal and informal interdependencies between platforms, portals, creators, and intermediaries. With his concept of the "new screen ecology" (NSE), Mehta makes a meaningful contribution to the study of creator cultures and offers a new language to articulate the broad sociological transformation that contemporary local production cultures are negotiating with as they undergo "metamorphic shifts" (p. 2) with the new digital interventions. Additionally, this book provides critical insight into one of the largest creator culture ecosystems in the world, situated within the colossal Indian media industry.

This nuanced analysis outlines the ways in which the advent of Internet-based content distribution services has emerged as "an alternative medium of distribution" that challenges traditional social relations (p. 120) and facilitates the Indian screen industry's move toward informality. For example, chapters 2, 4, and 5 discuss how this "alternative medium" for distribution destabilizes traditional forms of production and distribution and challenges long-standing social relations in the film industry among financers, producers, actors, and star directors. While offering new methods for monetization and distribution, digital streaming portals have also noticeably challenged the exclusive theatrical distribution of the cinemas. Furthermore, the NSE's global distribution network challenges Bollywood's "informal economic and social reciprocity nexus," which had previously frequently sidelined and disregarded the small- and medium-budget nonmainstream and regional films (p. 120).

In Mehta's account the NSE in India is a liminal space where "writers become directors, talent agents become producers, stand-up comedians become writers or actors, vloggers become actors, intermediaries become producers and so on" interchangeably (p. 1). Mehta explains that this fluid complexity is a result of the convergence of different media forms and situates it as "a site of continuity" that formalizes the "informality" of Indian film industries (p. 120). While Mehta's exposition focuses

specifically on the Indian context, this fluidity of roles represents many media industries in the Global South, where creative workers often find ingenious ways of increasing their social capital or their "value propositions in the media making process" (p. 2). In chapter 3, Mehta highlights the ways in which such fluidity not only offers aspiring filmmakers an opportunity to subvert the dominance of traditional media networks but also to circumvent class- and gender-based inequalities, as well as state regulations and censorship. This discussion also brings to attention the perils of such entrepreneurial labor of "building a media career from social media" (p. 69). Paradoxically, as Mehta points out, such negotiations with precarious creativity end up reinforcing and serving the same capitalist structures that produce these inequalities. But like most Global South creators who exist in peripheral precarious positions, these workers negotiate with capitalist social media logics and algorithmic uncertainty to gain social capital and creative autonomy through productive ambivalence, because it still offers a better chance of overcoming the gatekeeping of the traditional media and building a meaningful career as an outsider in the asymmetries of the creator ecosystem (p. 63).

One noteworthy aspect of this analysis is the significant attention paid to the role of language in the NSE and the localization strategies that creators use to negotiate with India's "linguistic and cultural logic" while catering to India's sociocultural diversity (p. 97). As the study shows, this fact not only underlines the distinctiveness of the Indian NSE but also highlights the pushback within the creator culture against the dominance of Hindi as a compulsory national language. Mehta's detailed study shows how social media has given regional content creators, who were inadvertently marginalized by the "closed door" and "hegemonic" practices of traditional regional media (p. 98), an opportunity to connect with larger audiences.

Another significant contribution that this book makes is its focus on the "indispensable" social category of the "intermediaries" (p. 117) in the media ecosystem, who have transformed themselves from marginalized, invisible mediators to become "proactive media industry trend setters" by providing diverse creative services across the Indian screen industries (p. 99). Importantly, as the discussion in chapter 6 highlights in detail, their ability to mediate the quotidian content-creation practices on new media demonstrates their power to influence the content that shapes the algorithmic culture of portals. In this sense, they play a particularly pivotal role in the NSE.

The comprehensive methodology, which includes "interviews with media practitioners, discourse analysis of interviews, textual evidence of select online media texts, and analysis of trade press literature and industry reports" (p. 21), highlights the variety of information and perspectives incorporated in this research. Mehta is clearly well-versed in the broader aspects of the field, and the research reflects the multiplicity of viewpoints included from various media markets and different spatial locations in India. Furthermore, the meticulously detailed descriptions in the book offer a diverse array of perspectives at the macro, meso, and micro levels (pp. 119–122). In this context, the discussion meaningfully builds on the theoretical frames of earlier influential critical media industries works (Cunningham, Craig, & Baym, 2021; Herbert, Lotz, & Punathambekar, 2020), which have been generously referenced throughout the book.

Given the extensive scale and scope of this study, in terms of the concepts, infrastructures, spaces, demographics, and networks included here, the book may require multiple readings for readers to familiarize themselves with the names of creators, networks, platforms, portals, and corporations that form the NSE in India. This may also well be one the significant strengths of this book itself. Mehta has neatly encapsulated

a vast amount of information, as he undertakes the colossal task of intertwining/summarizing the "everyday life social relations and economic exchanges" (p. 119) in the Indian media industry and consolidates his argument with relevant statistics that also offer a comparative perspective of the scale of differences between the local and global. While this book highlights the Indian context in particular, the arguments are broadly applicable in other Global South contexts as well. This discussion about the informality, precarity, and fluidity of the Indian NSE is reminiscent of other stories from South Korean, Turkish, Middle Eastern, or Latin American perspectives (Bidav & Mehta, 2024; Cunningham et al., 2021; Jin, 2021), as Mehta's other research also shows.

This discussion will be a significantly useful resource for creator cultural discourse, and the careful attention to detail in this book will certainly be meaningful for the study of sociology of work and cultural production, particularly in the Global South. Needless to say, this book provides useful insights and raises important questions for future research, with the thought-provoking questions and concerns that Mehta has raised about the developing dynamics of content creators' ecosystems in the Global South, the ethical and social implications of place-based, class-based, ethnic, and gender inequalities faced by the creators, as well as the broader asymmetric structural inequalities in the global field of cultural production.

References

Bidav, T., & Mehta, S. (2024). Peripheral creator cultures in India, Ireland, and Turkey. *Social Media + Society, 10*(1). Advance online publication.

Cunningham, S., Craig, D., & Baym, N. K. (Eds.). (2021). *Creator culture: An introduction to global social media entertainment*. New York: New York University Press.

Herbert, D., Lotz, A. D., & Punathambekar, A. (2020). *Media industry studies*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Jin, D. Y. (2021). Cultural production in transnational culture: An analysis of cultural creators in the Korean Wave. *International Journal of Communication, 15*, 1810–1835.