

YouTube Nation: Precarity and Agency in India's Online Video Scene

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This article analyzes the emerging culture of online video production and distribution in India to make a case for a growing subculture that navigates the divide between the amateur and the professional. Yet in the early stages, this cultural scene encompassing a mix of professional and nonprofessionals creating videos across diverse genres seeks to negotiate the affordances of the social Web to chart new pathways and trajectories that showcase an agentic subjectivity. Through interviews with participants involved in this process of production, as well as engaging with the texts produced by them, this article locates this subculture within the binaries of precarity and creativity, the global and the local, as well as the professional and amateur. Evolving alongside the dominant cultural institutions of India, this milieu remains in a dialectical relationship with it, both borrowing from it and being appropriated in return.

Keywords: cultural production, agency, precarity, India, YouTube

The diversity of recent scholarship about the Web acknowledges the often contradictory, but equally valid, perspectives in studying it to analyze both how it has allowed unprecedented operations of power and surveillance (Andrejevic, 2013; Turow, 2011), while also enabling newer possibilities for creation, associations and expression (Cunningham, 2012; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). As global, social, and cultural life gradually moves online, and digitally networked media embeds itself in varied aspects of human life, either/or claims about the Web become difficult to sustain, opening up avenues that necessitate situated analyses of the specificities of power, agency, and culture. This article attempts such an analysis to understand how the affordances of networked technologies have enabled a culture of production, sharing, and appropriation to reshape the global cultural order from the ground up. Specifically, it focuses on how the culture of online video production, consumption, and sharing on the Web has given rise to a media ecosystem, allowing for the expression of new subjectivities in India. This article seeks to understand how the ability to reach a wide and dispersed audience through video texts allows netizens to constitute a relationship with viewers, opening up new professional and performative spaces. In so doing, it demonstrates how this phenomenon is developing in a gradual and dialectical relationship with hitherto dominant industries, such as Bollywood, television networks, as well as India's celebrity culture that have remained the hegemonic forces within the sphere of cultural production in India.

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Date submitted: 2016-04-14

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By virtue of being the single largest video sharing platform in India, and given its ambitious plans of expansion there, YouTube is key to this article's analysis of the emerging culture of production and consumption of videos. India fits well within YouTube's global plans, given that more than 80% of its viewership¹ already exists outside the United States. Its attempt to localize itself across the world acknowledges that, despite the global character of the Web, online content follows "patterns of popularity that appear strongly constrained by geographic locality of interest" (Brodersen, Scellato, & Wattenhofer, 2012, p. 249). The existence of large numbers of globally viral texts (Shifman, 2012) are therefore counterbalanced by the predominance of local circuits of exchange and consumption and of YouTube's designs to open up local centers of production (Ananth, 2015) (currently in Los Angeles, London, Tokyo, New York, Sao Paulo, Berlin, Mumbai, Paris, Toronto) testify to this phenomenon. In their characteristics, these cities are analogous to and digital video versions of what Michael Curtin (2007) has called "media capitals," as centers providing dense networks of industry-specific labor that balance the centripetal forces of production with the centrifugal forces of distribution.

In the case of India, as elsewhere, these sites of production and training seek to bridge the amateur/professional divide that has occupied scholars analyzing the YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2009a, 2009b; Lange, 2009; Snickers & Vonderau, 2009) culture. More important, I show that they facilitate the emergence of a "scene" that is a community of conversation, exchange, and collaborative production of content. In theorizing the idea of a "scene" to describe music cultures, Will Straw (1991) defines them as a "cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other" (p. 373). By bringing the conceptual category from popular music studies to understand amateur cultures of video production, I draw parallels between the earlier iteration of the concept of scenes and the new formal and informal sites that bring practitioners and professionals together with amateurs and starters to create the media ecosystem of online video. While Straw's musical scenes are organic, freely forming spaces, the ones in the realm of online video remain nascent and still within corporate control. But behind the professional structures such as YouTube, spaces also exist—the unstructured relationships of collaboration and sharing visible in this article's analysis. More important for this study's purpose, Straw (2004) argues that scenes develop "on the edges of cultural institutions which can only partially absorb and channel the clusters of expressive energy which form within urban life" (Straw, 2004, p. 416). The still-emerging scene of online video production in India has a codependent relationship with the hegemonic cultural institutions by being both in competition with it but also gaining from the technical, cultural labor as well as its archive of readily available content to be used and reused.

Through analyzing the experiences of key participants within the culture of online video production in India, this article seeks to showcase a particular form of agentic subjectivity revealed when common citizens with little connection to professional media industries appropriate its technological and aesthetic affordances to carve a space for themselves. The experiences of amateur producers, often seeking different goals and in distinct genres analyzed below, nevertheless reveal a common attempt of carving out an online space by learning and negotiating its technical affordances while also leveraging relational networks in the off-line world. Arguments that focus on processes of collaboration, sharing, and production on the Web must be cognizant of the pitfalls of providing a celebratory account of new media

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html>

cultures that fail to acknowledge the structural power asymmetries within which subjects navigate and maneuver. In fact there exists enough evidence to support claims that increased interaction and engagement within preestablished terms and conventions realize the very designs of large media entities that use the networked democratic ethos of the Web to achieve their own commercial interests. While acknowledging that position, this article presents a tangential narrative focused on the specific ways in which common citizens negotiate those rules and conventions to their particular ends. In so doing, it charts what Stuart Cunningham (2009) has called the "middle way" that acknowledges the tendencies of capital but eschews the doctrinaire divide positioning the consumer and the citizen in an irresolvable either/or binary. This path that the article advances shows circumscribed agency that, even in its limited revelatory moments of cultural expression and creation, allows for a more dialectical understanding of relationships of power. As the experiences of the YouTubers analyzed below show, they engage and interact with the technical and legal regulations fully aware of their own limitations, but tweaking and manipulating them to their own benefit.

Mapping the Indian YouTube Scene

YouTube's dictum of "Broadcast Yourself" iterates itself differently in each cultural and social location. In India, its effect can be understood as the convergence and collision of two vectors emerging from different directions, and in so doing creating an unwieldy, chaotic, and pluralistic space irreducible to particular concepts and categories. The first of these is the migration online of India's established media industries that include cinema, music, and television that have each had well-established domains of professionalized structures for producing and marketing content and reaching audiences. The second is an organic, ground-up wave that Uricchio (2009) calls "bottom-up appropriations of the affordances of networked computers and various mobile devices" (p. 36) by amateurs and common citizens that were only consumers in a prior age that was dominated by the hegemonic professionalized industries mentioned above. The coming together of these seemingly divergent trajectories on a platform such as YouTube creates a space defined by "mutually constitutive interrelationships of the formal and the informal" (Cunningham, 2012 p. 416) that escapes easy theorization and conceptual explanation. In their analysis of YouTube, Burgess and Green (2009b) categorize three different sources of content, namely traditional media companies, Web media companies, and common users. Notwithstanding Patricia Lange's caution about determining a neat category of "ordinary users" (Lange, 2008), one can find similar broad categories on the Indian YouTube, with a far closer interaction between the latter two (Web media companies and common users) that is symbolized by the rise of intermediaries such as MCNs and YouTube's own in-house efforts to provide technical and other assistance to amateur content creators. Despite these interactions, however, a large number of content creators/producers remain independent, and the collision of these distinct cultural styles produces a teeming heterogeneity of contradictory logics and diverse aesthetics that, when combined with the linguistic, cultural, and regional disjunctures in India, replicates India's fragmented sociocultural milieu online.

YouTube's 2008 launch in India (only a year after Google's takeover of YouTube) demonstrates an early wager by its parent company on the still-emerging digital space of India. While estimates of how well their corporate designs of expanding and monetizing content production has panned out remain yet to be analyzed, its introduction in India has gradually created a media ecosystem which, in combination with

other Web platforms, has embedded itself within preexisting topics of cultural life including but not limited to Bollywood, politics, cricket, and music. More important, it has brought into the public domain newer avenues of cultural interest that were key points of conversation and interest but remained in the private realm, such as cooking, health, beauty, travel, and humor. This expansion also allows a breakaway from the prior logic of preexisting dominant media systems of television, cinema, cable, and music by bringing together content from each of those onto the Web and allowing their appropriation to create new meanings by new audiences. The thriving culture of mash-up and montage that overlays newer texts over prior, well-known cultural content by taking advantage of India's relatively loosely enforced copyright laws necessitates that we use an interactional perspective instead of neat categories to study the Indian YouTube. Notably, this emerging ecosystem thrives on India's rising digital penetration, whose growth is led by the adoption of mobile smartphones (Riley, 2015) instead of the desktop. YouTube's own measures to help access by increasing upload time through measures such as storing videos locally (Brodersen et al., 2012) and allowing off-line viewing of content (Choudhary, 2014) seek to mitigate the problem of access and point to the recognition of India as a key emerging region that will shape YouTube's global growth.

Alongside the content creators and the large media companies with readily available content to upload, the ecosystem around YouTube is also enabled by its own collaborations with amateur content creators through technical training, peer interaction, and revenue-sharing partnerships that have played a key role in shaping its recent growth. Monthly happy hours that bring together content creators, fan festivals where channel owners can interact with subscribers, enabling collaboration with professional studios through training in monetization and advertising that aids the overall culture of content production, are all geared toward tapping what has been billed as among the top three video-consuming countries in the world (Choudhary, 2014; Naidu, 2014). The India launch of YouTube Space (Ananth, 2015), a production studio for content producers in collaboration with Whistling Woods in Mumbai, is an instance of these in-house efforts wherein the desire to expand a culture of content creation seeks to invite those consumers of content just beginning to experiment with production and uploading of content.

Alongside YouTube's own efforts and in keeping with the trend in other countries with high video consumption, this ecosystem has also witnessed the rise of multichannel networks (MCNs) that bridge the gap between amateur content producers and professional media practices by outsourcing the technical, marketing, and financial aspects of the process to them. Their emergence in India opens up a space where new users retain control of the content while ceding ground to professionals in other areas, creating a hybrid space of "community and commerce" (Snickers & Vonderau, 2009). That these collaborations come with their own pitfalls and faultiness, however, is clear in user testimonies. Komal, one of the participants interviewed for this study whose channel The Delhi Fashion Blogger is among the most watched YouTube channels on fashion and beauty in India, acknowledges the fear of loss of control when MCNs approached her for a partnership. And even though she eventually got onto the MCN bandwagon, these doubts show that the commercial interests of the MCNs may not align seamlessly with those of individual users. The push toward greater commercialization, often coming from MCNs' financial imperatives and driven by their investors seeking returns, necessitates that MCNs tap into the emerging popular content creators to find content that could be supported by advertising online. These tensions reveal the contradiction between the democratizing and commercial imperatives on YouTube (Wasko & Ericsson, 2009) and critical scholars

justifiably raise concerns about the commodification and exploitation of user generated content (Andrejevic, 2013). Arguably, while a significant proportion of users have managed to leverage the existing structures and technical help to garner financial returns, the vast majority of content accrues no returns for their creators and thus remains a vehicle for advertisers to reach audiences. In India, the rise of MCNs such as Cultural Machine, Qyuki, Ping Digital, #fame, and Nirvana Digital (among others) with significant investments and financial backing (Vardhan, 2015) seeks to tap into this emerging area of content generation and audience interaction. In bringing their expertise in audience development, market analytics and network of sponsors, they promise significant value addition to amateur content creators, but simultaneously seek to ride on the wave of vast amounts of user-generated content.

In India as elsewhere, the coming together of amateurs and professionals on the same forum complicates the imagination of an ideal YouTube as uncontaminated by commercial considerations. This imagination is challenged by scholars (Burgess & Green, 2009a; Cunningham, 2012) who complicate the neat categories of the amateur and professional or the producer and the consumer to allow for more medium specific categories. While not disallowing that user-generated content has a unique aesthetic, it is equally crucial to acknowledge that on a platform such as YouTube, a wide range of heterogeneous forms, genres, and styles coexist, creating an interactional ethos where each type of content fulfills particular audience needs and desires. The clumsy home videos shot on cell phones and uploaded without edits, the Indian equivalent of the "ubiquitous and much-maligned 'cat video'" (Burgess & Green, 2009a, p. 90), and the highly produced television shows and Bollywood movie clips as well as an entire range in between make YouTube in India (as elsewhere) a storage archive and reference site for a wide range of content. In claiming that each of these genres and styles of content perform different function, one must acknowledge that, as in the case of the Western YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2009b; Snickers & Vonderau, 2009), the content that garners the most views are not necessarily the ones that are most discussed and commented upon.

The list of most subscribed YouTube channels in India² is notable for the preponderance of well-known media (Bollywood and television) companies on the list. Two exceptions—ChuChu TV³ and CVS 3D Rhymes⁴—are both Web-only companies based out of Hyderabad that create content for children and are ranked at third and ninth places, respectively. Despite having an Indian base and primarily India-focused content, they have both attained a global audience, driven undoubtedly by the Indian diasporic population with ChuChu TV being one of three Indian channels featuring in the global list of top hundred⁵ subscribed channels according to one ranking system that is updated each month. Barring these exceptions, the dominance of traditional media companies among the channels with most subscribers in India shows their content to still be the first and primary reason for which a majority of consumers go to YouTube. While YouTube in India has created popular figures with a large subscriber base (e.g., Vennu Mallesh, Kannan

² The list of most subscribed channels can be found here:

<http://vidstatsx.com/youtube-top-100-most-subscribed-india-in-channels>

³ <http://chuchutv.com/about/>

⁴ <http://www.cybervillagesolutions.com/aboutus.htm>

⁵ <http://www.tubefilter.com/2016/05/20/top-100-most-subscribed-youtube-channels-worldwide-april-2016/>

Gill, Lily Singh), they are far from having the kinds of cult following created by other traditional media, such as film and television.

Clearly, an attempt to study the Indian YouTube space must concede that, as the largest and most successful peer-to-peer video sharing platform in India, it allows for multiple narratives. Its effects range across different kinds of media content, including Bollywood, news, and entertainment television as well as the arena of social, political, and cultural critique. More so because the categorization along genres, style, origin, and subject matter must further allow for fragmentations along the lines of language and region. While a significant amount of its content is remediated from television and film, it forms only a part of the staggering amount of nontelevision/nonfilm content, whose cumulative effect in terms of sheer numbers has the rhetorical force of the "mathematical sublime" (Grusin, 2009, p. 61). YouTube brings together these heterogeneous video texts by creating a site of aggregation of videos which, as opposed to television, whose varying shows and artifacts create a "producer-controlled flow" (Uricchio, 2009, p. 33), allows users to create and generate their own flow through endlessly recombining videos, by choosing what to watch. No doubt, YouTube exercises control over those choices through its suggestions (e.g., Autoplay feature), but theoretically users can hop skip and jump across the search results to watch what they want and when they want to. This simultaneous access to content is novel in comparison to prior media forms, such as television, cable, DVR, or cinema, and any attempt to map the totality of its effects must acknowledge its synchronic and diachronic heterogeneity as well as its plurality of genre, style, and content.

Creative Entrepreneurs on India's YouTube

While the changes in the realm of media technologies are by themselves worthy of study, understanding the broader social and cultural effects wrought by the popular adoption of new media technologies allow us to move beyond the technological and textual changes to an equally fruitful dimension of how global subjects are engaging with and participating in these changes. The growing diffusion of the Internet has sparked an organic and generative creativity in the realm of content, and YouTube's particular format of audiovisual texts, channel subscribers, comment, and discussion allows for unique avenues of individual and cultural expression to a globally distributed audience. Consequently, the emergence of creative entrepreneurs who use its affordances to craft and project a professional and performative identity in the online and off-line world has been a key social consequence of YouTube's growth. While most visible in the major metropolitan cities of India, this rising group of creative entrepreneurs is increasingly visible in regions outside the major cities. Just as a multitude of new content cutting across genres, styles, aesthetics, and ideologies inherently democratizes the public sphere, the newer pathways to express and narrate one's life through the adoption of new identities, rhythms of work, and career avenues allows flexibility and escape from the routinized rhythms within an industrial economy.

The subjects interviewed for this article are the entrepreneurs and content creators that are representative of an emerging group that seek to move away from established careers to experiment with the flexibilities allowed by emerging digital cultures. The interviewees Gayatri Sharma, Cince Varghese, Vibhinna Ramdev, Dharmistha Dagia, and Komal Khulbe each arrived at the medium through different motivations and for pursuing different end goals, but share the common attribute of being average users

with little technical knowledge about audiovisual production. Each of them claims that the Web in general and YouTube in particular has allowed them to explore and craft careers that would be unthinkable in a pre-Internet era. Gayatri, a housewife based out of Mumbai, launched her cooking channel in 2008 after a desire to rescue a newly married niece from embarrassment over her lack of cooking knowledge evolved into an entire rhythm of producing and uploading cooking videos. Clince, Vibhinna, Dharmistha, and Komal each have sought to create careers wherein their YouTube channels are a part of, but invariably a central one, of a broader Web persona. Most of them have arrived at the medium gradually, often after their disillusionment with other vocational options. In classifying them as "ordinary users," one must bear in mind Patricia Lange's caution about how YouTube muddies that category. She asks provocatively, "Is the non-professional who aspires to be professional 'ordinary'? Is the advanced amateur who is wildly successful but has no plans to be professional 'ordinary'?" (Lange, 2008, p. 89). This question gained attention in the early days of YouTube when *lonelygirl15*, a seemingly "ordinary" girl's amateur-looking videos shot from her bedroom garnered tremendous viewership numbers and subscribers. The high quality of the videos juxtaposed with the believable acting and setting in a bedroom drew in viewers (including a website devoted to her created by the fans), but the plot was soon blown up as "one of the Internet's more elaborately constructed mysteries" involving an actress, a script, and a professional crew (Heffernan & Zeller, 2006). As we find below, interviewees seeking interaction from viewers must often strike this balance between a slick, high-quality content and the "at home," relatable look.

Komal's trajectory leading to The Delhi Fashion Blogger (39,000 subscribers) began with academic ambitions through writing fashion blogs, moving to a more conventional job, before finally deciding to devote herself entirely to her YouTube channel. The three videos, on average, that she uploads each week, leave her little time for another job, and while she concedes that running the channel and managing her persona across other Web domains (Twitter, Facebook, website) has crept into her free time, she is also beginning to accrue substantial rewards. Vibhinna, based out of Bangalore, whose career as a classical dancer was cut short by a foot injury, found a way to continue her performing career, albeit in a different avatar, through her now year-old YouTube channel (*Vibes and Smiles*⁶) that focuses on social and political commentary through humor. With over a thousand subscribers for her channel and growing, Vibhinna symbolizes the idea of a creative entrepreneur who has learned technical skills from scratch by watching online videos and reaching out and collaborating with other actors and producers. Clince and Dharmistha, both based out of Mumbai, have similarly leveraged YouTube for their professional goals. While Dharmistha uses her professional network among celebrities to conduct interviews and video features on television actors, Clince's YouTube channel has allowed him to bring together his diverse repertoire of VJ, Emcee, musician, travel blogger, and event host while constantly remaining in touch with his viewers and fans. The experiences of these individuals reveal a particular kind of subject negotiating the technological affordances of the Web to risk a new career path that subverts the usual markers of status and wealth. Their struggles, motivations, identity work, and affective investments, captured below, represent important dimensions of a new form of global cultural labor, whose dialectical relationship with Web platforms allows us to theorize the sociological dimensions of the global Web.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPHUwdfFLWZOScVhaF8sXA>

Motivations

The inspiration that brings these entrepreneurs to the running of a YouTube channel is revealing in how the platform has embedded itself within the sociocultural milieu of India. Each of them has leveraged its ability to broadcast to a dispersed audience to open up avenues outside the routinized professions they seek escape from. This point is underscored by Cline's claim that "there would not have been a Cline Varghese prior to YouTube and social media. I would have a nine-to-five job" (C. Varghese, personal communication, February 14, 2016). Cline's active and engaging presence on YouTube and other social media, where his content ranges from travel diaries and videos of his performances, makes up for his status as a newcomer (at a relatively younger age of 25) competing in a field of well-established professionals. His present job profile as a performer and event host is significantly aided by an active Web presence that showcases his ability to express the multifarious dimensions of his personality through YouTube and other Web platforms. Komal's fashion channel emerged from a similar experience of boredom and frustration from her regular job that required a crushing two hour commute. "The 9-5 job made me feel like I was dying . . . my brain cells were depleting" she explains pointing out that her strategy of continuing to upload videos along with her punishing schedule began to pay off when she realized that she was getting more revenue from the channel than the salary from her job. She now has a much more manageable work pace, and in pointing out that "I get to earn money and to think," she hints at the control and full ownership over what she does (K. Khulbe, personal communication, February 23, 2016).

This thread of disappointment and frustration with prior careers is a recurring thematic among reasons for experimenting with the new medium. Vibhinna's injury, for instance, was followed by a stint at her father's furniture business for a few years, an experience that further convinced her to get back to a career centered around her performative talents. Acting in front of the camera for her humorous episodes seems a natural extension of dancing in front of an audience, even though learning the technical skills of production was a challenge, she explains. This thematic resonates with the life stories of Gayatri and Dharmistha, both of whom quit their jobs as bankers and journalists, respectively, to pursue vocations that have been more fulfilling.

The fact that four out of five participants are women, despite a random solicitation, is not a representation of the gender distribution within the overall Web population of India. However, it could point to the gender distribution within this particular niche of creative entrepreneurs, besides showing a willingness to respond to the call for interviews. While the inbuilt flexibility of the Web allows more control and maneuverability around other jobs and tasks, scholars have argued that this does not necessarily translate to a more equitable gender distribution in key domains of digital culture. In fact, studies on Wikipedia (Gardner, 2011; Lam et al., 2011), a site where gender on the Web has been rigorously analyzed, reveal that only between 10% and 13% of all editors on the English Wikipedia are women (Bayer, 2015). While specific studies on YouTube have found a similarly low percentage of women users, this disparity seems to reduce within the texts of the video blogs (vlogs) (Molyneaux, Gibson, O'Donnell, & Singer, 2008).

The gender of these entrepreneurs becomes important because the logistical, behind-the-scenes aspects of running a channel include extensive travel. Dharmistha's YouTube channel, that focuses on

celebrities' lives and interviews, for instance, requires frequent travels on her own within Mumbai that her conservative family has struggled to get used to. She explains:

My parents were not too happy about it initially but gradually got used to it and realized that the Internet is allowing newer career avenues for women. You will be surprised at the number of blogs featuring women—so many moms and they are earning through their blogs—you don't have to invest much—for print or electronic media you have to invest a lot more. (D. Dagia, personal communication, February 18, 2016)

The struggle she mentions finds resonance in other women YouTubers and dispels notions that running a YouTube channel is primarily the technical work of shooting and editing.

Agentic Subjectivity

The creative cultivation and management of their on-screen persona is key to how the interviewees' assert themselves to use YouTube's affordances for their own ends. In a space of teeming competition, it is imperative to stand apart with a distinct personality and style, and performing particular identities is an essential part of this agentic subjectivity visible within India's YouTube culture. Erving Goffman's (1959) radical theorization that pushes us to reimagine interaction in daily life as actors "performing" roles on a stage is prescient in making sense of YouTubers' descriptions of their identity management. Komal claims that in running a fashion/lifestyle/beauty channel like hers, "image is everything," and she attributes her success in emerging as an "influencer" to very detailed attention to building trustworthiness and relatability. Her unique conversational and informal style includes cracking jokes, making funny faces, and frequently crooning and often recording videos in her pajamas, thus ensuring that "gradually people got interested in my personality." The subjects of her videos range from makeup tips, cooking, and product reviews to home remedies and are just as important to this image as is her effervescent personality that invites the viewer into an intimate space in her home. In speculating over the mantra in running her channel, she explains that "it is all about trust in India and you can lose that trust even if you falter once. Viewers can be a bit more judgmental here" (K. Khulbe, personal communication, February 23, 2016). This philosophy seems to have held her in good stead in resisting pressures from MCNs and brands that seek to reach audiences on the coattails of her popularity. The work in the construction of a credible persona for Gayatri similarly involves coming across as an expert, and she does so by deemphasizing her own presence, to focus instead on the pan where the food is being cooked.

Similar to Komal, Gayatri makes a case for keeping a deliberate amateurish quality to her videos, as she has continued to shoot using the same camera that she began her channel with. Amid a deluge of cooking channels vying for viewer attention, Gayatri's loyal subscriber base has been built through a nuanced attention to viewer needs, such as red-flagging mistake-prone moments in cooking, being very precise in instructions, as well as presenting a compassionate persona who promptly responds to viewer queries. While most Indian YouTube channels have a transnational audience, given the large size of the Indian diaspora, this is especially so in the case of cooking channels, given their important role in the lives of most expatriate Indians who rely on blogs and YouTube videos to master the complexities of Indian cooking (Hegde, 2014). A particular genre of e-mail queries about cooking that Gayatri describes come

from newly married women, often living outside India, but who avoid the public comments section for fear of being judged. In a slightly different vein, Cline reveals how the platform has allowed an “exploration” of newer sides of his own personality. His YouTube channel functions as an always accessible online portfolio that he points his prospective clients to for them to learn about his wide range of talents and repertoire. He explains:

What they are looking for other than social presence is that brand value you are selling to them. If you can show them an engagement with audience it helps present a fuller picture of yourself even before they have met you. (C. Varghese, personal communication, February 14, 2016)

An active presence on YouTube and other social media is a sign that one is connected to the world and has figured out a way to draw out engagement with their audience/followers. Cline’s testimony is important because he does not see the online video forum as an end in itself, but as a means toward his larger goal of reaching out to potential clients for professional opportunities in the offline world. The reciprocal interaction of the online and offline revealed by interviewees shows how projecting an online persona involves off-screen negotiations and leveraging of preexisting social networks.

For Vibhinna, her channel’s growth has mirrored her own steep learning curve from branching out into new areas of technical knowledge essential to successfully running her channel. She elaborates upon this process of branching out through trial and error:

I learnt through online tutorials that I spent hours searching for. It wasn’t that difficult in terms of equipment as I already had a DLS camera but I did not know how to use it very well. I have learnt so much . . . even the editing part where the first video took me 2–3 weeks to edit I could now do in 2 days. I have experimented with windows moviemaker, Adobe Premier Pro that I found was not a user-friendly software. It is a process. (V. Ramdev, personal communication, February 14, 2016)

Her learning was not limited to technology alone, as she had to tap into her social network in Bangalore to connect with a cinematographer from who she learned shooting and editing. She explains her process of growth: “When you are shooting yourself it takes double the amount of time. If you see my second video I was playing all my characters myself.” Her ability to get technical help and congeal together a crew exemplifies what I have alluded to as tapping into the informal “scene” where participants in the cultural economy form a loose network that coalesces around particular projects. Her story is not too dissimilar to many others with a desire to create content who taught themselves the process by scouting out resources in the online and offline world. They reveal a process of negotiating with and leveraging of existing resources and networks in a process of “making do” that De Certeau (1984) has labeled as tactics that citizens deploy as modes of resistance in their quotidian lives. Komal, too, narrates how she bought a Nikon camera along with a tripod and taught herself the skills of video production and editing. She reminisces that she “Googled how to make videos—everything I have learnt is on my own—nobody in my family has this knowledge” (K. Khulbe, personal communication, February 23, 2016). These experiences of Vibhinna, Gayatri, Komal, Cline, and Dharmistha symbolize a process that, while hardly a sign of some

utopian democratization of technology, nevertheless points to limited circumscribed moments where users assert themselves against structures by appropriating technical tools.

Cultural Labor

The fact that their channels require significant investment of time begets the question of compensation and the exploitation of their labor by Web entities such as YouTube. Scholars (Curtin & Sanson, 2016) argue that the fragmentation and changes underway within global media industries have shone light on the precarity of labor. In discussing questions of livelihood and income through their channels, one must also be aware of the built-in structural asymmetries in the digital environment (Andrejevic, 2014), wherein the process by which revenues are determined remain opaque to content creators who must trust the algorithmic roll of dice to calculate how many ads play on their videos and the revenue they generate. Conversations with YouTubers reveal that despite mechanisms set in place for earning revenues through advertisement, they must moderate expectations of earning money through their channels. Advertisements remain the primary source of revenue, but in a cluttered environment of copycat channels and fragmented viewership a large percentage of these channels make no money at all. Komal estimates that only about 10% of the social media influencers end up earning revenue, but as the case of Cline shows, monetary return is not the only reason to have a YouTube channel. In fact, in some cases, running a channel for maximizing monetary returns is bad strategy, as one is invariably led toward the path of compromising the integrity and trust of their audience for monetary gains. Komal, who frequently gets approached by companies for including their products in her videos, explains that about 40% of her entire revenue comes from advertising, with the remaining 60% from companies whose products she uses in her videos. "One has to strike a fine balance and think long term," she surmises, explaining that succumbing to the demands of brands (e.g., using particular buzzwords in talking about the product) can put off viewers and turn one's channel into merely an extension of brands and advertising (K. Khulbe, personal communication, February 23, 2016). This also requires making ethical choices, such as staying away from products that make problematic claims, such as pills that promise weight loss and skin lightening creams.

While the issue of revenue from their channels is high among their priorities, most channel owners strike a note of caution against over reliance on it for a steady source of income. This is an acknowledgement of the economic model of YouTube, but also of India's unique cultural economy (Goel, 2015) that is still resistant to paying for cultural content on the Web. Gayatri's cooking channel makes her as much money today as did her salary as a banker, but the revenue stream has remained stagnant for the past three years, an acknowledgement of the growing number of cooking channels seeking a share of the advertising revenue. In explaining this change, she shares that "in 2010 all our videos were being advertised upon, but in 2013 that number reduced to 60% and it is expected to further go down to 40%-50% this year" (G. Sharma, personal communication, January 8, 2016). Notably, the owners of channels have little say in determining these numbers, and scholars (Cunningham, 2012) point to the urban myths about how YouTube and Google's algorithms are weighed against users. "Newer videos get preference as do videos from the same region," Gayatri's husband explains thus implying that a newcomer has as much chance of visibility as a well-established channel (S. D. P Sharma, personal communication, January 8, 2016). While the specifics of how YouTube determines user views and search results remain unknown, the

very democratic ethos that ensures equal play and visibility also makes it a venture of diminishing returns for channel owners. While the model above works for the well-established channels such as Komal's and Gayatri's that have a loyal audience and subscriber base, it increases the waiting period for relative starters such as Vibhinna, Clinice, and Dharmistha. Given the dynamics of rapidly increasing content competing for limited advertising revenue, they should be willing to persist with creating and uploading content during the incubation period of little to no returns.

YouTube's Reshaping of Political Culture

A narrative about India's YouTube is partial without incorporating the ways in which it has transformed the political discourse within the country. Along with other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, YouTube has inarguably staked its claim as a popular forum for deliberation, arguments, and counterarguments with its distinctive feature being the use of audiovisual media. While it is far from achieving some utopian ideal of free expression, its emergence as an archive of videos ranging from news, entertainment, and documentaries as well as those uploaded by users make it a readily available and frequently used reference point, even when the actual discussion may be occurring in another medium/forum. While the proliferation of a culture of dissent through parody, satire and mash-up videos by organized groups on YouTube has been analyzed by scholars (Kumar, 2014; Punathambekar, 2015), its use by commoners to express, rant, critique, and comment is just as insightful in how it exemplifies their appropriation of editing and media production skills. Lev Manovich (2008) likens these "conversations between individuals through media in a networked environment" (p. 42) to earlier iterations in the field of art, literature, music or cinema where artists either directly or indirectly responded to interlocutors through content, form, or style. In fact, Manovich argues, "Modern art can be understood as conversations between different artists or artistic schools" (2008, p. 41). While other platforms such as Twitter and Facebook allow similar conversations using texts, images, and memes, the primacy of video in the case of YouTube shapes the unique nature of the conversation on it.

A phenomenon that exemplifies this on the Indian YouTube is that of relay videos that repeat a concept, a buzzword, or phrase to make interconnected texts that seemingly respond to each other and continue the conversation onward. A transnational example of this occurred during the cricket world cup, when an advertisement released by a television network sought to reignite the traditional rivalry between Indian and Pakistan before the high voltage match. In invoking the fact that the otherwise strong Pakistani cricket team had never won a cricket match against India in a world cup, the advertisement used a jingle "mauka-mauka" (*mauka* can be translated as "opportunity") showing a Pakistani man who buys firecrackers before each world cup match in the hope of celebrating, but is disappointed. Partly because of its catchy tune, but also because it invoked a historically bitter cricket rivalry between the two countries, the jingle itself went viral, spawning an entire series of copycat videos made by average users enacting different scenarios to participate in a grammar of contention (Kumar, 2015). What was notable about these "mauka" videos was their transnational character, as fans from Pakistan soon took the bait and joined in to respond. These videos and the overall phenomenon that represent sparring between two groups over an issue or topic showcase one dimension of what Patricia Lange has called "videos of affiliation" (Lange, 2009, p. 71). She defines these as videos created among and for an in-group that may share a hobby, institution, or ideology. The "mauka" videos that brought together cricket and nationalism

were shared and responded to by viewers inhabiting rival nations, but united in their passion for cricket. While being at loggerheads, the Indian and Pakistani fans also formed a collective in-group watching, liking, sharing and commenting on each other's videos. In fact, a video with one of the highest view count in this series shows Pakistani fans driving around the UAE (a country with large Indian and Pakistani expatriate populations) to locate Indian fans and sing the jingle to their face on the day India got knocked out of the world cup. It was a fitting culmination to the video parley that had captured the national imagination and provided a welcome respite from the typically vicious political discourse between the rival nations.

The average user's participation within the more serious political discourse is similarly visible in two distinct types of videos that address politics more directly. The first is the type where a user addresses prominent political leaders and celebrities about national issues or prominent news events. Given the euphoria that led to the election of Narendra Modi to power (May 2014), he is a particularly frequent addressee of these rants from common citizens expressing themselves on public issues. Other targets include prominent Bollywood celebrities, especially about comments/statements made by them or viewer reviews of their movies. These videos typically require little editing as they are recorded in a single shot in front of a straight camera as the person talks to the addressee. The second type of videos that are directly political display a more complex skill set of production and editing that are increasingly becoming more widely learned and used. This category of videos use skills such as overlaying sound and text within a video or editing and positioning videos besides each other to make an argument. These videos represent, especially when made by common users and not official members of political parties, a new kind of digital literacy that has risen alongside the adoption and growth of YouTube in India. The learning process necessary for this digital literacy is no different from the ones described earlier by the entrepreneurs running YouTube channels.

In creating a mash-up of clips often to show politicians reneging on their promise or making an embarrassing faux pas, users display a particular notion of circumscribed agency wherein they operate within the available choices to express themselves in new ways. Manovich's analysis of the agentic aspect of YouTube culture reverses De Certeau's binary of strategies and tactics to show how corporations in a postmodern digital economy are increasingly utilizing elements such as remix, bricolage and reassemblage that would have counted as tactics deployed by resisting consumers within the broader framework of homogenous mass-produced goods. "In other words," he explains, "the logic of tactics has now become the logic of strategies" (Manovich, 2008, p. 38). This reversal is a caution against reading YouTube consumers' acts of production as some unconstrained organic expression. In fact Web-media entities such as YouTube invite, enable, and encourage these creative engagements to serve their larger goals of increased interactivity. But the fulfillment of the larger designs of increased user engagement through creative interaction does not necessarily take away from their interventions within the political discourse that these texts participate in. Their large number on the Indian YouTube shows that the genre of juxtaposing clips of contradictory statements, creating a collage of misspoken words, or quotes taken out of context represents a political act that embeds itself within preexisting partisan discourses. Their goal to ridicule, mock, and deride rather than engage in careful deliberation to persuade those with opposing views is "playful and affective in nature" instead of a goal to "explicitly aim at specific changes in policy" (Häkkinen & Leppänen, 2013, p. 6).

The function of these texts is affective in that they seek appreciation from an in-group of like-minded users as opposed to acknowledgement from and persuasion of opponents. They solidify and entrench one side of the argument that is "essential in maintaining a politically active consciousness that may, when necessary, articulate a sizable oppositional voice" (Papacharissi, 2009, p. 243). This phenomenon is better understood through the concept of "agonistic plurality" advanced by Chantal Mouffe (1999, 2005) instead of the Habermasian public sphere of arguments and counterarguments that must move toward some converging middle. In reformulating the opposing side as an adversary with whom one engages according to agreed-upon rules, Mouffe is moving beyond a conception of deliberative democracy based on the dialogic model. Her conception envisages a "conflictual consensus" that accepts and legitimizes conflict between opposing ideas that coexist and acknowledge adversaries in an enduring tension. User-created YouTube videos that advance an argument or political ideology are therefore better seen as a move within this adversarial context wherein common participants use them to engage within the agonistic democratic discourse.

Conclusion

Despite being among the top three markets for online video, India's YouTube scene remains surprisingly understudied. While still nascent, its study nevertheless provides glimpses into how a future cultural economy that expands the base of cultural producers could look in India. Indications of that future already exist, given the ongoing democratization in the culture of video production and the important role it has begun to play within the political and cultural discourse in the country. In showing the process by which average users negotiate the technical and logistical challenges to become regular contributors of content, this article seeks to initiate a conversation about the emerging future of cultural industries in India. India's digital culture will both reshape and be shaped by its existing media and film industry that is among the largest in the world. The unfolding of that interactional process while being informed by theoretical categories emerging from other sites is also irreducible to them. The goal of this article has been to go beyond the transformations resulting from a democratization of content to analyze how the changes in the quotidian lives of new entrepreneurs is inflected by India's unique sociocultural milieu. As early entrants within a new media environment, the participants interviewed for this article learn through trial and error to tread a path whose precarity holds risks, but also rewards by allowing them to shape its trajectory. Despite varying degrees of success, they remain key protagonists in shaping a new relationship between cultural institutions and audiences in India.

Future studies on the entertainment and cultural industries of India must engage with this emerging dimension, whose cumulative effects are bound to increase exponentially with more digital access, better bandwidth, and cheaper access to the Web. The dominant cultural industries of India cannot remain unchanged from the effect of the expansion of this ground-up culture of production, collaboration, and sharing. The increasing appropriation of this emergent space means that while the dominant media institutions will continue to hold sway in the digital realm in the short term, the nature of that dominance as well as their cultural product will increasingly change to adapt to the new medium. As recent instances of crossovers in both directions show, traditional media corporations are increasingly open to appropriating and borrowing content, ideas, or even styles and genres from the Web.

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