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IN(TER)DEPENDENCE IN PLATFORMED CREATION

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In recent years, a variety of cultural industries have been transformed by platformization – a process in which technology companies serve as intermediaries connecting different parties (most importantly cultural producers and audiences) through websites and applications. From music to book publishing, movie production, and the visual arts, cultural production has undergone massive changes due to platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, Amazon, Goodreads, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Etsy, etc. In most cultural sectors, creators now have to grapple with the platforms that make their work visible to online audiences. This often means paying close attention to the

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quantitative infrastructure of platforms, namely their algorithms and analytics, which drive visibility and commercial success.

This panel examines what these economic and technological changes imply for the independence of cultural production. Classical studies of culture often emphasized the role that the values of independence and autonomy play in shaping artists' worldviews and practices. From Bourdieu's analysis of "fields of cultural production" as "the economic world reversed" to Becker's theory of "art worlds" where internal dynamics redefine external constraints, or the Frankfurt School's critical take on the demise of aura through mechanical reproduction, sociological approaches have paid close attention to the threats to independence emerging under modern capitalism. In fact, most classical sociology saw cultural producers in the mass cultural industries as having little independence, often assuming (sometimes without empirical research) that the massification of culture would destroy original and critical art works.

Here we revisit the question of independence in the context of platformed creation – a term that embraces all forms of cultural production that are mediated, in part or completely, through digital platforms. By bringing together scholars studying different aspects of platformed creation and reflecting on the concept of independence through diverse disciplinary lenses, we ask: what does independence look like in the context of platformed creation? What are some of the theoretical and methodological tools available to scholars for making sense of cultural, economic, and technological independence in the case of platformed creation? And how do these evolving forms of independence affect the kinds of art works and cultural tropes that circulate online? These different studies aim to put the concept of independence in dialogue with the question of interdependence (among cultural producers, audiences, and platforms) in a mediated digital world.

Paper 1. "YOUR VAULT WAS CLEANED DUE TO PROHIBITED CONTENT": PLATFORMING INDEPENDENT PORNOGRAPHY

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Introduction

Nearly all digital content creators are bound by the policies and terms of service that govern the platforms on which they post and distribute their work. These rules are anything but static; they shift according to moral panics and controversy, legal regulation, and sometimes, in response to the demands of creators and audiences themselves. As Tarleton Gillespie (2018) has discussed, content moderation policies on some of the largest mainstream social media platforms tend to be written and enforced by enormously privileged people (ie: White, male, highly educated, well-compensated tech executives and managers). Furthermore, Sarah Roberts (2019) has detailed the ways in which the work of content moderation has been made nearly invisible by

platforms, in part to hide how the rules are unevenly enforced, entail an incredible amount of subjective interpretation, and to obfuscate the harms that content moderation workers experience at work.

The experiences of sexual content creators, and broadly anyone who plays with mediated sexual expression, in our contemporary internet landscape are often left out of both scholarly and policy conversations about content moderation and platform governance. In this paper, leveraging on-going research on digital sexual cultures, I explore two overlapping research questions:

- 1) How do queer people who create independent pornography navigate the changing terrain of “prohibited” content on social media?
- 2) How does the classification and management of sexual content function as a convening technology for sexual cultural producers, audiences, and platforms?

Methods

This paper emerges from in-progress digital ethnographic doctoral research of queer social media subcultures and sexual content moderation. Specifically, I leverage 1) participant observation on mainstream social media platforms like Twitter and Reddit, 2) interviews with sexual content creators, 3) textual analysis of social media posts, and 4) critical discourse analysis of community guidelines, terms of service, and press coverage of sexual content moderation. For the purposes of this conference presentation, I present selected cases that focus on moments of contention and confusion for sexual content creators as they make sense of their cultural production becoming “prohibited” or otherwise marked as improper by platforms and audiences.

No dick prints on Instagram, no fisting videos on OnlyFans...

As Katrin Tiidenberg and Emily van der Nagel (2020) have detailed, social media platforms have become more and more sex negative in recent years as they work to

forbid sexual images, video, conversation, and references from their ideal vision of mediated public life. In my research thus far, I have noted two broad themes related to this multi-dimensional censorship of sex and sexuality:

- 1) sexual content creators and everyday social media users alike are no longer able to engage in sexual cultural production in limited visibility settings (ie: Close Friends Stories on Instagram, NSFW-tagged Twitter profiles, and direct messages on mainstream social media platforms)
- 2) even platforms that are purportedly intended to support the distribution of sexual content like OnlyFans have introduced changes to their terms of service that prohibit sexual expression that falls outside “normal” parameters (ie: fisting, BDSM, body modification).

Tiidenberg and van der Nagel's (2020) categorization of interconnected sexual social media practices (consuming, creating, and interacting) illustrates the diverse ways that people engage with sex and sexuality online. The queer people that I focus on in my research have a variety of reasons for participating in sexual social media practices. Some cultivate sexual community to which they otherwise do not have access in their current physical locations, while others depend on their digital sexual connections for education and psychosocial wellbeing.

Furthermore, as Hacking//Hustling (2020) writes, "adult content guidelines have been used as an excuse for the systematic violence that denies sex workers free access to social media and financial technologies, which are both a means to more safely make a living." In this way, beyond their deleterious effects on playful and recreational sexual social media practices, social media platforms that censor, deplatform, and otherwise purge sex and sexuality are directly responsible for damaging the livelihoods of sex workers and endangering them as they further forced to the margins of public life.

Sorting nudes out: Classification and its consequences

Classifications, as Bowker and Star (1999) describe, are rich avenues to explore cultural, political, and ethical concerns that shape human-technological relations. Social media platforms, especially those that have policies prohibiting nudity and sexual content, devote a good deal of algorithmic and human attention towards classification. For example, how do platforms decide whether a nipple should stay or go? How do we know what a nipple looks like? Does it have something to do with its overall shape, color, or immediate surroundings on the body? When does a nipple become sexual? Now, what are "female-presenting" nipples exactly and what have platforms done with them (Pilipets and Paasonen, 2020)?

Of course, this problem is not limited to nipples; underwear width, bulge size, body hair, and even the presence of innocuous objects that might look *too similar* to sex toys all face classification-based content moderation. These classification decisions have cascading and often unequal effects. Based on interviews, participant observation data, and textual analysis, queer sexual content creators increasingly face shadowbanning and other "soft" moderation tactics, seemingly arbitrary removal of videos and images

due to vague language about "extreme or violent" content, and deplatforming from mainstream social media with little or no explanation as to how they violated terms of service.

Ultimately this research takes up Ysabel Gerrard's (2020) provocation to explore "processes of social media content moderation that are perhaps most vulnerable to human intervention" (pg. 749). As a queer scholar of color, I am particularly sensitive to and interested in the experiences of queer cultural producers whose work focuses on sex and sexuality. The messiness of sexual content moderation offers a unique window to interrogate politics and material conditions of platformed creation.

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Paper 2. Making Sense of Metrics in the Music Industries

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In recent years, the measurement of media audiences has been transformed by the shift to digital networks of sales and distribution. New technologies of data tracking and collection made available by the internet, social media, and smartphone apps have fundamentally altered how media industries gather and analyze data (Napoli, 2015). There is more data, it is more detailed, more networked, and it measures many more aspects of the audience than it used to. Businesses that made money out of tracking, analyzing, and selling information about media audiences have grown bigger and more diverse (Turow, 2011). These include not only older providers such as Nielsen and a host of new competitors tracking digital distribution, but also the tech platform giants themselves, which play an increasingly powerful role in media and its measurement. In the age of downloads and streaming, the platforms that distribute media have an immense amount of granular data on what audiences consume and how. Some of these metrics they deliver back to creators, managers, and users; others, they withhold.

For some, this industry of metrics means the firms that make judicious use of them can be more responsive to their audiences. Some accounts taking this position are rather credulous and celebratory, such as press coverage of Netflix that has attributed its great success to its ability to match content to audience needs (Plummer, 2017). By contrast, there is widespread concern that artists and producers may be increasingly tailoring what they create to what all this available data tells them is likely to be popular (Hu, 2018; Morris, 2020). Much recent scholarship in internet studies and related fields such as media and communication studies and cultural sociology sees audience metrics in a more sinister light, often resonating with broader concerns about an increasing emphasis on *quantification* in modern societies.

While critics of digital platforms are undoubtedly right to focus attention on their new and distinctive modes of power, understanding of that power needs to take into account the agency, practices, and values of those who use them. How often a song has been played or how many subscribers a performer has accumulated may appear to be simple facts, requiring neither interpretation nor skepticism. But in practice, those who use these metrics to make decisions and investments must make sense of these numbers for themselves and make them persuasive to others. Surprisingly little research has paid systematic attention to how media industry workers make sense of information about audiences in the new data-abundant environment and what this sensemaking means for our understanding of media production and consumption; the main exceptions come from journalism (Christin, 2015; Petre, 2020). In this paper, we discuss how media producers engage with metrics via a case study of music -- a particularly interesting example of the "platformization of cultural production" (Duffy, Poell, & Nieborg, 2019) given that music has so often been at the forefront of media digitalization and datafication (Morris, 2015). Drawing on interviews and a survey that we conducted, we analyze ways in which musicians and music industry intermediaries use, negotiate, and in some cases, refuse the metrics available to them. We distinguish two main ways in which metrics are used by workers in the music industries: 1) internally, drawing on them, often selectively, to guide decisions in highly risky

environments, and 2) externally, crafting persuasive stories in order to achieve goals when communicating across the highly fragmented setting of the music industry.

Our aim is not to celebrate the agency of such workers and thereby dismiss or minimize platform and metric power. It is to explore and categorize the diverse manifestations of this agency and acknowledge its constraints. We recognize that, in historical terms, the reliance of music industry workers on information provided for them by digital platforms represents a new form of dependence. But we seek to unpack the nature of that dependence, rather than assume the forms it takes. We want to understand how musicians and music intermediaries live with this aspect of platform power.

The paper unpacks a range of ways in which music industry workers use, frame, question, and contextualize the mass of metrics now available to them. These practices are quite remote from dystopian notions of a world in which music industry workers exercise a blind faith in numbers and are led by them to ignore, simplify, or misunderstand the messy realities of the business of music, creativity, and taste. Our research does *not* demonstrate the generalized commensuration and reactivity identified by some scholars as responses to quantification and “metrification.” Perhaps this is because the music industries attract people who tend to be at least somewhat suspicious of rational or scientific thinking, at least as applied to the cultural domains in which they work—or at least understand that they involve interpretation, ambiguity, uncertainty, and tacit knowledge.

On the other hand, we find little evidence of out-and-out rejection of metrics. A concern with metrics does seem to be pervasive or all-encompassing. But in interpreting them as important potential signals of audience activity and preference, people found a variety of ways to probe, question, qualify, and challenge these metrics while by no means abandoning a sense of their overall value. Decisions were guided, rather than determined, by reference to these available numbers, which were often used as a basis for telling “stories,” conveying trajectories, exercising persuasion. No doubt some such uses of metrics come close to hustling. But our research suggests that industry insiders are sophisticated in their ability to contextualize such stories, sometimes by mobilizing other data that might be available. There was also a widespread understanding that some actors are much more interested in and captivated by numbers than others, and so there are times and contexts in which metrics are much more useful and relevant than others.

The range of empirical realities uncovered in the paper resists any simplified tale of music industry workers as victims of a metric power introduced into the music industries by the tech industries. Yet it would be equally mistaken to think of the increasing availability of data and metrics as a form of democratization, allowing for greater transparency. The sheer range of potential data available represents a considerable challenge for many people working in the music industries. Metrics provide openings for those who are prepared to invest time and energy in collecting, interpreting, and framing them to gain advantages. But of course, this requires time, expertise, resources, and most importantly access to the data. The best-resourced and most powerful actors continue to be able to use metrics most effectively toward their goals.

To summarise, our paper shows that the longstanding quest to “know the audience” has not been fulfilled by the rise of digitalization or the expansion of audience measurement techniques. Instead, attention to data has gotten more granular, more in need of triangulation with numerous other data sources, and at times more neurotic. The media industries continue to be a place where workers “make do” with the resources provided by the systems of which they are part, and upon which they increasingly depend, in order to manage the uncertainty that is endemic to the business of culture.

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Paper 3. Algorithmic Fields, Drama, and Extremization Among Vegan Influencers

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Since the 2016 presidential campaign, a rapidly expanding body of research has examined the dynamics of online polarization, defined here as the divergence of attitudes towards ideological extremes. Quantitative researchers have mapped the effects of algorithmic “filter bubbles,” “echo chambers,” and “rabbit holes” on political views and electoral polarization (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015; Bail et al. 2018). Qualitative analyses of online disinformation have examined the effects of media manipulation, algorithmic sorting, and content moderation in the diffusion of problematic or inflammatory content, which fuels online polarization (Gillespie 2018, Howard 2020).

To date, less attention has been paid to the other side of online polarization: the production side. Who are the people engaged in creating extreme, inflammatory, and partisan information? And why do they engage in such production? Journalistic accounts and policy studies often brush these questions aside, simply mentioning the existence of “bad actors” amplifying disinformation. In the scholarly literature, the relative absence of research on digital creators producing disinformation stems in part from the difficulty of getting access to these “troll” actors, who often thrive through opacity and obfuscation (Lewis 2018, Ong and Cabanes 2017). Such an absence in turn comes at an epistemological cost. By focusing primarily on the diffusion of existing pieces of problematic content, researchers tend to take the dominance of platforms at face value (Caplan, Clark, and Partin 2020).

This article offers an alternative approach for understanding polarization on social media platforms. I focus on production practices, examining how and why influencers and content creators publish incendiary, extreme, or problematic information on social media platforms. While the category of influencer is notoriously hard to define (Duffy 2018), here I use the terms “influencers” and “creators” interchangeably to refer to individuals who seek to earn money from their social media production.

To understand their production dynamics, I offer a meso-level perspective in terms of algorithmic fields, or online configurations that are primarily enabled and mediated through social media platforms. Influencers do not produce content in a social vacuum: they operate within algorithmic fields, which in turn differ from classical fields of cultural

production (Bourdieu 1993, 2006) in two main ways. First, they feature a stark power structure that is primarily implemented through algorithmic procedures instead of intermediary gatekeepers. Second, specific capital within algorithmic fields takes the form of online visibility, which functions as an inescapable mandate measured and enforced through an arsenal of metrics and analytics. Consequently, the structuration of algorithmic fields tends to be more volatile than in traditional fields. I delineate two ways that the structuration of algorithmic fields leads to polarization among creators: *drama*, or scandals in which online creators and users engage in contentious position-takings (Christin and Lewis 2021); and *extremization*, in which creators entrench their polarized worldviews through niche and inflammatory content.

To analyze how drama and extremization fuel polarization within algorithmic fields, I draw on a qualitative study of vegan influencers on YouTube and Instagram. Though veganism is not explicitly about institutionalized politics, it raises important – and polarizing – questions about animal ethics, climate change, and individual responsibility in the context of agro-industrial capitalism. During the 2010s, the number

of influencers posting vegan content rapidly grew, first on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, later on Instagram and TikTok. As the social media market for vegan content expanded, it became competitive, with influencers vying to attract online audiences, advertising revenues, and sponsored deals. Starting 2015, vegan influencers witnessed a series of scandal and controversies, with certain influencers criticized for lying about their actual eating practices, promoting dangerous diets fueling eating disorders, relying on extreme conspiracy theories, and encouraging their followers to engage in online harassment.

This article is structured as follows: after reviewing the literature on online polarization, disinformation, and partisan content creation, I offer a meso-level framework in terms of algorithmic fields, which differ from traditional fields of cultural production in two main ways: the relative absence of human intermediaries and the unescapable mandate of online visibility, both of which are enforced through algorithmic procedures. Consequently, I argue that the structuration of algorithmic fields leads to more volatile and radical position-takings, which unfold in two main ways: drama and extremization. To illustrate these processes, I turn to the case of online vegan creators. After introducing my methods and data, I analyze the evolution of the algorithmic field of vegan influencers and delineate how drama and extremization reshaped the field in the second half of the 2010s.

This analysis shows the relevance of using the concept of field for the study of platformed creation. This means amending Bourdieu's framework for the digital realm. Indeed, compared to Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art*, influencers and content creators operate in an almost entirely heteronomous landscape shaped by commercial forces, audience approval, and algorithmic intermediation on digital platforms (Siciliano 2021: 153). As communication and media scholars have argued, the concept of field works better for autonomous forms of production than for mass communication and cultural production (Schudson 2005). As Hesmondhalgh (2006: 2017) once noted, Bourdieu writes "like the cultural industries never happened." Drawing on recent sociological studies that seek to amend Bourdieu's concept of field in order to account for highly

heteronomous social configurations (Eyal 2012, Panofsky 2011, Medvetz 2012), I analyze the configurations between influencers on social media platforms as a field, even though the capital specific to this field (online visibility and audience engagement, measured through online metrics) is highly heteronomous. Furthermore, I label this kind of field “algorithmic” due to the unprecedented role that automated computational procedures play in mediating, structuring, and enforcing hierarchies among social media creators.

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Paper 4. The Barcode and The Algorithm: A Comparison of Infrastructural Power in Conventional and Platformized Cultural Production

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Research on platforms suggests that global corporations now exert incredible *infrastructural* power over cultural production as more and more cultural producers, seeking success and visibility, tailor their products to meet the demands of platforms' algorithms (e.g., Beer 2009; Bucher 2012; Caplan and boyd 2018). Rather than consider this a novelty of platform capitalism, I argue in this paper that a similar infrastructural power over cultural production may be observed in earlier modes of cultural production just prior to the rise of platforms. Through an ethnographic comparison of conventional and platformized cultural intermediaries (respectively, a "indie" music distribution company in 2010 and a multi-channel YouTube network or MCN in 2015), I illustrate two infrastructurally contingent modes of "independence." Rather than "disruption," platforms continue and expand corporate power over cultural production.

To make this argument, I present a comparative study of cultural intermediaries in music just prior to the rise of platforms and contemporary social media – respectively an "indie" music distributor that manages production for record labels and musicians and a multi-channel YouTube network that manages thousands of YouTube content producers. Both organizations do the work of formatting cultural commodities in order to facilitate exchange. The social media intermediary encouraged YouTube content

producers or “creators” to produce content tailored to YouTube’s algorithms, hoping to make the “creators” whom they represent more legible to the platform. Similarly, the music intermediary came into direct conflict with conglomerate media firms over their clients’ (mis)use of barcodes, a requisite marker required for global circulation. In the name of “independence,” many record labels who worked with the music intermediary refused to use barcodes – forgoing mass retail opportunities – or used barcodes reluctantly, often in creative ways, to make their vinyl records and compact discs products visible to global distribution systems and market information regimes such as SoundScan (see Anand and Peterson 2000). As I show, companies that refused the “proper” use of barcodes became invisible to these systems, resulting in the destruction of “indie” products as they traversed conglomerate-owned distribution networks.

In the production of popular culture, independence and creative autonomy have long been symbolically powerful discourses that animate and give meaning to practices in a variety of fields (see, e.g., Hesmondhalgh 1999; Moore 2007; Newman 2009; O’Connor 2008; Ortner 2013; Siciliano and O’Connor 2012). This was especially common during the mid-to-late 20th century in cinema and music production with the rise of independent or “indie” films and “indie” and “DIY” music; each with distinct aesthetic conventions and associated production practices, often developed in contrast to the “studios” in film or music’s “majors” (conglomerate-owned record labels). “Independents” arose in response to large corporations that exerted power through their ownership of distribution networks. These larger firms that own distribution networks shaped cultural production by means of gatekeeping or determining what pieces of culture flow from producers to consumers (Hirsch 1972). Here, I argue that these companies delegated certain gatekeeping functions to infrastructure in ways similar to contemporary examples from research on platformized cultural productions.

“Independent” companies provided alternative distribution networks, often for innovative and unconventional cultural forms. During this time, “independence” referred to a genre (indie), distribution networks outside the “majors,” and, as I show, aesthetic practices involving the (mis)use of barcodes. By the late 1990s, the lines between “indies” and “majors” became blurred both symbolically and in terms of ownership as both major film studios and music companies purchased or contracted with “independent” distribution companies (Dowd 2004; Hesmondhalgh 1999; O’Connor 2008).

Today, most producers of popular culture distribute their products through digital platforms owned by global corporations such as Google, Apple, Amazon, and Facebook; further blurring the lines between “independent” and “corporate” cultural production. Though initially seen as “democratizing” cultural production, corporate platforms exert power over cultural production at the level of infrastructure, determining the visibility and availability of cultural content by way of algorithms and by encouraging particular formal regularities – a process that scholars drawing upon Michel Callon (1998) identify as “formatting.” Thus, the platformization of cultural production results in formal similarity across wildly diverse content (Caplan and boyd 2018; Siciliano 2021).

Comparing the operations of an “indie” intermediary in 2010 to the operations of a social media intermediary in 2015, I find both contending with the gatekeeping power of infrastructures. The more conventional, “indie” music company sought to evade the use

of barcodes as a form of symbolic resistance, one often framed in political and aesthetic terms. This practice resulted in exclusion from mass-market distribution networks that require barcodes to facilitate circulation. At the same time, the practice tended to be associated with “cred,” a type of symbolic capital specific to “indie” and “DIY” music in the 1990s and early 2000s (O’Connor 2008). To illustrate these points, I follow a specific piece of music that the “indie” intermediary attempted to have traverse the networks of the “Majors” and demonstrate how the “indie” company’s (mis)use of barcodes results in illegibility vis-à-vis distribution infrastructures, much to the economic misfortune of the “indie” company.

Similarly, the social media intermediary attempted to shape content to meet YouTube’s algorithms. Unlike the music intermediary, the social media intermediary and its “creators” rarely used “independence” as justification for production practices. Instead, most content producers described themselves as “entrepreneurs” operating within and subordinate to an ecology of platforms. Rather than attempt to symbolically resist the formatting of their products, the intermediary and its “creators” sought to tailor their products to the platform’s stated requirements. Failure to do so may result in invisibility on platforms much like the “indie” intermediary’s illegibility and exclusion from “Major” distribution networks.

Using these two cases, I theorize infrastructural power over cultural production as offering a spectrum of formatted “independence.” The older example of infrastructural power leaves both the form and content of cultural products relatively untouched, “independent” saves for a properly formatted container. Properly formatted containers (e.g., CDs or vinyl records) facilitated circulation through corporate infrastructures by means of externally visible markers (i.e., barcodes). In contrast, the contemporary, platformized example of infrastructural power directly shapes the form of cultural products, leaving producers “independent” to produce a diverse range of formally similar content in their pursuit of algorithmic visibility. This suggests continuity

in corporate power over cultural production, while also demonstrating the infrastructural contingencies of “independence.”

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