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THE PRECARITY, PERILS, AND PROMISES OF EMERGING CREATOR ECONOMIES

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In their work on "cruel optimism," Berlant (2010) describes how the formation of attachments to particular objects and ideas can be tied to "compromised conditions of possibility" related to broader social, political, and economic changes. While such attachments can provide subjects with a "sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world," Berlant explains that they are also "incoherent and enigmatic"— tied to vague and only ever partially grasped "cluster[s] of promises." Following a similar set of interests, this panel focuses on the relationship of emerging creator economies to conditions of precarity, as they have come to develop in several distinct yet partially overlapping social and historical contexts. Across the various contexts considered in these papers, emerging creator economies, and the media practices and technologies which constitute them, appear as often attached to various contextually situated promises—of social mobility; political empowerment; cultural recognition; fame and wealth; or healing and relief from systemic forms of harm.

This panel considers how various individuals, social groups, and organizations have, through participation in and strategic engagement with emerging creator economies,

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sought to achieve at least one (and in some cases, multiple) of the above listed goals and objectives. Utilizing a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches that collectively prioritize ambivalence and contextual nuance over sweeping generalizations, each of these five papers in some way balances an interest in the unique social and political potentials that emerging creator economies have helped (or might help) to realize, in a given context, with a critical awareness of the systemic forms of inequality, political disempowerment, and social and psychological immiseration that creator economies have also contributed to and intensified.

The first paper, "Fantasies of Amplification: Emerging digital music creators in rural India," looks at the experiences of a Dalit content creator operating out of the Bhiwani region of Haryana, India. Based on ethnographic fieldwork performed in Summer 2022, this paper argues that the promises of fame, monetization, and a desire to transcend social divisions based on caste and religion, have all contributed to content creators' specific approaches to content creation on YouTube. These predominantly internet/platform-based modes of content creation are contrasted with the mobile street performances of many of the same content creators, and the non-signifying sounds and embodied relations that these performances enable.

The second paper, "Platform Orientalism: Asian Boss and YouTube Demonetization in the Historical *Longue Durée*," presents a media historical analysis of "Asian Boss" YouTube channel’s struggles with demonetization on YouTube. Asian Boss is mainly a street interview-based channel that produces content aimed at bridging cultural knowledge gaps between global East and West, targeting questions of stereotypes, social justice, and politics in particular. This focus on difficult and often contested issues has led to most of the Asian Boss catalog being demonetized by YouTube for not being “advertiser-friendly.” This paper discusses this moment’s implications within a media-historical *longue durée*, ultimately arguing that the dynamic of demonetization of Asia-focused knowledge content that is both conventionally serious and does not play to historical Euro-American desires for orientalist consumption shows the historical inertia of orientalism and orientalist consumption as they play out in the politics of today’s digital platforms.

The third paper, "Digital labor in the times of right-wing ethnonationalism: insights from an Indian election campaign," looks at the targeting of minorities through digital platform use as an emergent political strategy, through a case study analysis of a 2024 parliamentary election campaign in a constituency in the state of Uttarakhand, India. Drawing on Appadurai's (2019) writing on "aspirational hatred," this paper maps ethno-nationalist themes and tropes as they are deployed across a range of different platforms, as a key component of contemporary digital political campaigns.

The fourth paper, "The Legacy of the New Age on/as Online Video Platforms: An Analysis of CrystalTok," looks at the attempted use of audiovisual platforms like YouTube and TikTok by individuals living relatively affluent Western settings as a means of self-medication and self-healing. Focusing in particular on the example of "CrystalTok," this paper ties various close readings of CrystalTok videos to beliefs and practices that have historically been associated with the New Age movement, including especially the notion of strategically tapping into an invisible world of energies and spirits.

The fifth paper, "Content Creators as Custodians: How YouTubers Affect Social Engagement in Neoliberal India," examines the growing influence of motivational speakers and development gurus in the state of Assam, India, within the specific context of the 2024 General Elections. Noting how these speakers, who are mostly active on YouTube, have positioned themselves as "custodians of culture, traditions, and local narratives," this paper analyzes the unique role that they have played in the BJP's campaign strategy, and in effectively legitimizing the prerogatives and interests of the neoliberal state at local levels.

In each of these papers, we encounter individuals, groups, and institutions who have, in the pursuit of different "promises"—wealth, power, fame, belonging, recognition, "healing"—found themselves at the forefront of emerging creator economies. Through careful analysis, these papers collectively reveal the co-productive nature of these economies with systems of relations that extend well beyond "social media," including but not limited to: neoliberal entrepreneurialism; Hindu ethno-nationalism; imperial metropolitanism; and New Age and alternative healing practices.

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FANTASIES OF AMPLIFICATION: EMERGING DIGITAL MUSIC CREATORS IN RURAL INDIA

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From a rural village located in the arid, almost drought prone, parts of Haryana’s Bhiwani (in India), VDM runs and manages a YouTube channel. This is, of course, a part time job. An elementary school teacher, he got interested in “the Internet” after his songs, written for a regional Dalit-run production house (Dalits are historically marginalized caste groups within South-Asian social hierarchy), started doing well on YouTube. Soon enough, his songs were being played in local village events; he got calls for interviews from an online news portal; and he started imagining getting famous.

Using VDM’s and others’ experiences in running and managing YouTube channels, in this presentation, I aim to generate insights on how content creators, aspiring to monetize their content, understand platforms and their technical functioning.

Particularly, I am interested in how knowledge around platform temporalities–that relate to ideal times for posting content or events around which content supposedly garners maximum views–is built up overtime through contextual and site-specific uses of audio-visual platforms. I ask: How do content creators understand and leverage platforms, and their technical operations, as tools? How do political subjectivities modify and come about in relation to ways of operating platforms? How does the consequent interaction of historical marginalization and emerging ‘creator’ identities tie into emerging nationalisms?

The secrecy around monetizing content on YouTube, and constant modifications to Google’s PageRank algorithm, has given rise to a category of experts who speculate on the streaming platform’s functionings. Bishop (2020) discusses these experts or coaches as cultural intermediaries (drawing on Bourdieu’s work) who propagate ‘algorithmic lore’ on what constitutes ‘good content’. Caplan and Gillespie (2020) have spoken of a structure of YouTube’s practices of ‘tiered governance’ that rewards and protects premium creators more than others, in turn contradicting a level playing field for different kinds of creators. The lack of purported transparency and shady algorithmic behavior has encouraged emerging creators to speculate and arrive at their own conclusions regarding YouTube’s inner workings. I argue that such speculations have been informed by specifics of the geographic and cultural contexts within which content creators are located along with their motives and desires of amplification.

The potential for monetization, becoming popular, and being able to capitalize religious or national events (festivals, observations) are all part of how the ‘self’ is modified in relation to ‘technology’. Here I am interpreting technology broadly to think about audio-visual platforms and their complex technical governance, expectations of use, and best-use practices. The construction of subjectivities in relation to technology has been written about scholars who deploy materialist frameworks for analyzing media technologies (Hayles, 2012; Packer and Wiley, 2011). However, specifically for VDM and creators like him, there is a sense that such ‘becoming’ can bring seemingly disjunctive selves together. For instance, as a Dalit person vocally dismissive of Hindu religious rituals (for being historically exploitative of Dalits under Brahmanical traditions), VDM generates content—such as skits, videos, and songs—to post on the eve of Hindu festivals and events attempting to capitalize around popularly searched keywords. This practice can, in one instance, be read as subversive. This would involve observing how tools–inescapable rituals and events– at the disposal of historically marginalized groups are being used for creative modes of expression. However, within a larger conversation of burgeoning hate speech and Islamophobia over audio-visual platforms (Baishya, 2022; Nizaruddin, 2021), such practices potentially risk benefiting Hindu ethnic nationalism and diluting anti-caste movements from and within minoritized groups. Such disparate subjectivities, that I just described, emerge along with algorithmic structuring of platforms and their consequent role in modifying social and cultural time.

Finally, VDM’s aspirations as a creator transcends motivations such as attaining widespread fame through the affordances of social-networking platforms or gaining monetary benefit. Content creators of music and music videos often prepare and expect for their content to play over physical, and often mobile, loudspeaker systems. I have previously understood and analyzed some of these as DJ trucks–where loudspeakers are retrofitted on large trucks that are operated by a DJ figure and a driver. The motives for amplification are both geographical (reaching a large group of people) but also physical and affective. It is through such remediations that content creators aspire for simultaneous local and national fame. And yet, as songs resonate and reverberate over bass-heavy speaker systems, linguistic signifying sounds cease to have much relevance. The communicative act, per Nina Eidsheim (2015), includes both the non-signifying sounds as well as the embodied relations they facilitate. As a result, it is also important to connect the fantasies of amplification that creators like VDM have beyond the linguistic-significations of music that are privileged over the Internet.

This presentation connects the aspirations of content creators, and their technological negotiations with the platform, to the politics of blasting music on city-streets over large speaker trucks. In doing so, it tries to bridge the 'digital' and 'physical' dimensions of the sonic experience, especially as it manifests in rural and suburban India. I argue that the affordances of platforms that enable monetization of music or sounds is just one reason for a burgeoning creator industry. Viewing these industries from the lens of Hindutva and its capture of the mundane, I am interested in how the physical remediations of music over systems of amplification can turn its meaning and signification on its head. Ultimately, the beats, vibrations, and its resonance on the bodies speak louder than words.

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PLATFORM ORIENTALISM: ASIAN BOSS AND YOUTUBE DEMONETIZATION IN THE HISTORICAL *LONGUE DURÉE*

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With 3.74 million subscribers as of February, 2024, Asian Boss is one of the largest street-interview based channels on YouTube. Their decade-long catalog includes 1,300 videos featuring compilations of interview footage from various countries on the vast Asian continent, but with a particular focus on China, Japan, and South Korea, although interviews and questions from numerous other countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Syria also appear. Many of the channel's videos address quotidien life differences, reactions to Euro-American stereotypes about people in Asia, and some content that focuses on more fun or silly topics. Generally, though, Asian Boss' focus is on information and street-level knowledge sharing.

On their channel page, the group's mission statement reads:

> *We bring you the most authentic news from all over Asia, featuring real people's voices and stories.*
> *Our mission is to bridge social and cultural gaps between Asia and the rest of the world to prevent World War III (Asian Boss).*

This is an intense brand message for a street interview channel on YouTube. It also assumes an outsized level of responsibility and power for a YouTube channel. Looking at a channel that simultaneously sees itself as 1) a key epistemic intermediary between East and West, and 2) an agent of peace, my question is how Asian Boss's media-historical situation fits into *longue durée* histories of empire, orientalism, and orientalist consumption. Ultimately, this project asks whether Asian Boss is succeeding despite the difficulties of running an anti-imperial channel dependent upon platform imperialized infrastructures like social media platforms and conventional User Generated Content pathways.

The project is methodologically-driven by the work of Chen Kuan-Hsing and of the *Annales* School of historians. Chen's book *Asia as Method* (2010) proposes a *geocolonial historical materialism*, which argues that any attempt to produce new epistemic reference points originating from and serving imperial peripheries must contend with a trialectic of coloniality, global historical currents, and local historical specificities (p. 66, 108). The Annalists, a group of historians originating in interwar France that rose to immense import in the mid-twentieth century, stressed the interplay of varying historical temporalities, interdisciplinarity, and globality (Braudel, 1949, 1980; Burgiere, 1982). They drew together with tremendous intentionality the work of historians, sociologists, demographers, economists, and anthropologists, forming the bedrock of emergent social historiography. A synthesis of Chen's work and that of the Annalists pushes media-historical work to draw back from historical myopia to focus generatively on the ways that we can analyze the construction and articulation of cultural imaginaries through intertemporal interplay. Accordingly, this project is based around Asian Boss's various materials, channels, sites, and productions as historical archive, but it also approaches them with a sensitivity to their place within the meso-

and macro-levels of historicity through histories of colony, empire, and consumption in the *longue durée*.

The historical flashpoint I begin with is Asian Boss's 2023 outreach video in which channel co-founder Stephen Park announced the launch of the organization's Patreon, independent subscription service through their website, and app in an effort to keep the proverbial lights on despite mass demonetization from the YouTube platform on swaths of their content. In it, co-founder Stephen Park describes the dire financial straits the company found themselves in. He argues that they are an organization driven by passion and integrity, as well as a resolute resistance to algorithmic censorship and sensationalism. He outlines significant personal and professional struggles after he and Kei Ibaraki founded Asian Boss in 2013, and the takeaway is simple: YouTube will no longer allow the organization to function, so to financially sustain themselves, they are now trying new approaches.

Opposite this project of deimperial knowledge production, the practice of demonetization is more than a platform showing the power and control that scholars have pointed out for more than a decade now (Gillespie, 2010; Jin, 2013; Gray, 2016; Singh, 2018). The practice of demonetization is a disciplinary move by YouTube's content moderation teams and algorithms that marks out content that is deemed in breach of copyrights, conduct guidelines, or "Advertiser-friendly content guidelines" (Google, 2024). Among these advertiser-friendliness guidelines, the platform lists obvious points like "adult content," "harmful acts and unreliable content," and "hateful & derogatory content," but they also list vague or ultimately unenforceable policies by censoring "inappropriate language," "violence," "shocking content," and "controversial issues." In Asian Boss's case, this includes topics like extraordinarily high suicide rates in South Korea and other concrete social problems that require dialogue and awareness as part of their solution.

Demonetization is an outright exercise of power and epistemic violence that – while it certainly cuts multiple ways and does discipline its share of bigots and hatemongers – imposes its fair share of harms in the name of positive panopticism. Ultimately, I argue in this talk that Asian Boss offers a testament to articulations of platform imperialism and of orientalist consumption's massive place within imperial metropolitanism. Asian Boss sits at an interesting place. The majority of their videos, per channel co-founder Stephen Park, have been deemed "too political" and demonetized or shadowbanned by the YouTube platform. A channel that addresses homophobia in Indonesia, exploitative work culture in China, suicide in South Korea, and North Korean refugees faces consistent financial backlash for doing so. From a materialist point of view, this primarily illustrates that YouTube, as a platform, enforces sanctions against content more frequently at the flashpoint of human rights issues, and in doing so, the platform favors conditions of Asiatic possibility that lend themselves to orientalist consumption that forced Asia open to the West repeatedly in the long past. Asia is to be eaten, bought, and feared. It is an object, not a conversation partner.

Demonetization cutting the financial legs out from under Asian Boss rhymes with other historical entanglements of Euro-American empires and orientalist consumption. In even American public schools, we have taught the roots of the "Age of Exploration" as the desire for Indian spices and Chinese silks, and there has always been the weight of military and religious force behind these ventures. Dutch and Portuguese traders reaped war profits from the chaos of Japanese *Sengoku Jidai* (1467-1600); European powers encouraged and profited from opium pathways into mainland China; American Commodore Matthew Perry forced Japan open to foreign trade in the 1850s at cannon-point; and French and U.S. troops stormed Gangwha Island off the Korean peninsula in a diplomatic flex against the late Joseon dynasty in 1871. In the 1920s, the number one export from China to the U.S. was *mahjong* sets, which white, middle class publics used to perform and produce deviations from hegemonic femininity and engage with the exotic East (Heinz, 2016). Set within the course of such events, the demonetization of videos by a channel that positions itself as raising awareness to promote peace and head off a future World War between Asia and Euro-America takes on the context of reasserting Western control over the Pacific, intentionally or not. This produces epistemic violence through comparative historical importance.

Pursuits of historical causality have caused tremendous harm, particularly to women, scholars of color, LGBTQ+ scholars, and those of class-based minoritizations and others. While causality has its place and space in the historiographical tradition, it overemphasizes the importance of intentionality and expectation. What remains of central importance is description, contextualization, and comparison. This is the legacy of the Annalists. So what does the panoptic work of demonetization do in transpacific contexts? What can be claimed about it descriptively and comparatively? It reiterates and reproduces the colonial and imperial past.

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DIGITAL LABOR IN THE TIMES OF RIGHT-WING ETHNONATIONALISM: INSIGHTS FROM AN INDIAN ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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Contemporary India is witnessing a unique moment in its history with the electoral consolidation of right-wing Hindu nationalist (Hindutva) politics under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi which has led to the emergence of a majoritarian state (Chatterji et al., 2019). Circulation of extreme speech, misinformation and violence that targets the minorities has played an important role in this consolidation and digital platforms have been integral to the present-day existence of this circulatory network. This paper focuses on the role of digital labour in expanding such circulatory networks. The creator economy around right-wing ethnonationalism in India is analysed to understand how the existing ecology of digital platforms contributes to the functioning of this economy. While drawing from existing scholarship on right wing online content creation in the Global North, the paper argues that unlike in these contexts, such content creation cannot be positioned as outside the mainstream in the present political scenario in India where a large section of news channels and right-wing discourse across digital platforms draw from each other. In other words, discussions about industrialization of digital content creation in India will have to take into account the vector of right-wing Hindu nationalism within this process of industrialization.

Cunningham and Craig (2021) have used Govil's (2013) arguments in the context of Indian film industry to formulate their criteria to consider SME (Social Media Entertainment) as industry. This paper contends that these criteria which includes size as well as scope, difference from other especially neighbouring industries and move towards formalisation can be applied in the Indian context to consider right wing Hindu nationalist (Hindutva) content creation as an industry. While the so-called IT cell of the ruling Hindu ethnonationalist party BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) is certainly a central player within this industry, the paper argues that the range of practices within it that range from Hindutva pop music (Purohit, 2023) to the use of WhatsApp to coordinate violence (Nizaruddin, 2022) points to the size and scope of this industry which exceeds the operational limits of the BJP IT cell. Drawing from an ongoing study on hyper local content creators in India, the paper argues that precarious working conditions for a sizeable section of content creators set by major global digital platforms (Bidav & Mehta, 2024) contributes to the landscape within which Hindutva content creation emerges as an industry. For many creators working in hyperlocal contexts, earning an income via major digital platforms is not a viable option. In this context, multiple efforts and payment schemes by the BJP government in the centre as well as BJP ruled states elaborated in the paper that incentivises content creation that contributes to the expansion of iterations that aim to build a consensus around the majoritarian state become attractive options. Apart from the government schemes, IT cell of the BJP as well as the broad network of party sympathisers and the wider field of Hindutva groups provides various entry points to be a part of the Hindutva content creation industry. The paper argues that the spectrum of opportunities available within this industry is broad. On one end of the spectrum are activities that are informed by the logic of “aspirational hatred” (Appadurai, 2019) which incites targeting of minorities as a way to rise in stature within the field of right-wing ethno-nationalist politics. However, drawing from the empirical study, the paper will argue that the Hindutva content creation industry offers a broad range of possibilities to participate; not all these possibilities need an alignment with the BJP or the Hindutva ideology. This becomes more pronounced in the cases where BJP governments play a role. The entry of the majoritarian state might signal the beginning of a degree of formalisation which is one of the criteria that Cunningham and Craig (2021) put forward to identify the emergence of an industry. Since the targeting of the minorities is the logic around which the Hindutva content creation industry functions, it can be viewed as contributing to the culture of impunity in the majoritarian state where violence against the minorities by state as well as non-state actors are being normalised (Bhat, 2024) (Chatterjee, 2017).

The paper concludes by arguing that the emergence of the Hindutva content creation industry in India can be understood by extending the frame of ‘shadow politics’ that Sahana Udupa (2024) puts forward in her recent article on the digital influence operations in India. In Udupa’s formulation, “Shadow politics refers specifically to the manner in which dispersed and “bottom-up” networks are integrated into the party campaign structure via indirect sanctions and incentives”(Udupa, 2024). According to her, the shadow politics in India of digital influence operations can be linked to other practices such as distributing money or liquor during election time. Unlike in the case of shadow politics which has integral links with the so-called official party politics, the Hindutva content creation industry is not formulated by the broader social media entertainment industry. However, it can be argued that it is emerging in the “shadow” of the broader contours of this industry. The thresholds for entering and gaining monetary or other benefits within the Hindutva content creation industry is considerably low when compared with the broader SME industry. The Hindutva content creation industry needs to be situated as one of the “shadow industries” that is expanding under the extremely precarious conditions of digital labour set for content creators by contemporary platform capitalism. The paper broadens the call to look at the labour conditions that sustain disinformation environments (Grohmann & Corpus Ong, 2024) and contends that misinformation is a better frame in the Indian context because not all actors including content creators might be aware of their role in consolidating networks of misinformation, extreme speech and violence. There is a need to map similar shadow industries in other parts of the world and their relationship with right-wing governments. Participation in such industries need to be positioned within the frame of the mundane everyday as well as compulsions around digital labour in precarious working conditions.

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THE LEGACY OF THE NEW AGE ON/AS ONLINE VIDEO PLATFORMS: AN ANALYSIS OF CRYSTALTOK

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This paper examines some of the emergent media forms, practices, and subjective modes that characterize CrystalTok. Similar to BookTok, FragranceTok, and other "subcommunities" on TikTok organized around shared topics of interest, CrystalTok encompasses a vast body of audiovisual media, circulated on TikTok and across various other platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, devoted to the specific yet broadly defined topic of healing crystals. As it is discussed in this paper, CrystalTok also encompasses individual content creators, as well as the viewer-listeners who regularly consume CrystalTok content.

Drawing on religious studies scholarship on the New Age movement, internet and platform studies scholarship, and critical theoretical work on neoliberalism and neoliberalization, this paper begins with the basic assertion that, from their inception, audiovisual platforms like YouTube and TikTok have, in relatively "affluent" Western settings especially, served as a seemingly convenient and affordable means of attempted self-medication and self-healing within a broader context characterized by increasing precarity, commoditization, and hyper-individualization. Through close analysis of a number of popular examples of CrystalTok videos, this paper further argues that the ostensible "healing" that CrystalTok has to offer its users can be generally divided into three subcategories: healing knowledge or information; healing sensations; and, lastly, healing energies.

The first of these three categories, healing knowledge and information, refers in part to the systems of meanings commonly ascribed to healing crystals, wherein specific minerals are posited to have unique yet also somewhat generic benefits for their "users." For instance, in a CrystalTok video entitled "4 Crystals You Should Wear Everyday," uploaded by stonesofvirtue in February 2023, the channel creator lauds the mineral Pyrite for its unique capacity to "bring an abundance of health and wealth [t]o you and your loved ones" (Rose, 2023). In a comment on the same video, user Girlwiththehandbag expresses their disagreement with the inclusion of the mineral Obsidian in the video: "Not black obsidian!! Too strong for everyday!" On CrystalTok, one finds a whole matrix of similarly formulated promises and suggestions regarding how minerals might be deployed by individuals to provide some kind of benefit or advantage throughout their daily lives—often paired with some acknowledgement of states and conditions deemed as unsatisfactory (e.g., stress, anxiety, exhaustion, burnout, depression, etc.). TikTok thus appears as a kind of accumulated reservoir for these sorts of associations to be repeatedly reinscribed by content creators, and "tested out" by viewer-listeners.

This first form of healing is therefore, I argue, of a rather indirect sort. It still implicitly prioritizes the material acquisition of healing crystals "outside" the boundaries of the screens and speakers through which platforms are made perceptible to users. In other parts of CrystalTok, healing crystals are more plainly acknowledged as being not just a unique category of tangible objects, but a kind of commodity. CrystalTok serves to establish this commodity, in the minds of CrystalTok enthusiasts, as not something totally discrete or self-contained, but which rather coheres quite neatly with platform logics of circulation—a common subject of interest amongst media scholars and theorists in recent years (Eichhorn, 2022; Kornbluh, 2024; Packer et al., 2022). As something both deeply participatory and radically open-ended, the healing knowledge of

CrystalTok is, as Berardi (2017) writes "not about truth or about discovering and displaying the essential reality—it is rather about the creation of meaning and in the invention of technical interfaces projecting meaningfulness into reality" (p. 198). That being said, interfaces do not merely serve to facilitate the circulation of healing knowledge/information on CrystalTok, but also help to constitute healing sensations.

The healing sensations of CrystalTok, this paper argues, can be found in videos that either place a particular emphasis on the physical appearances of healing crystals as part of their perceived "benefits," or, somewhat similarly, in videos wherein content creators have focused on the aesthetic qualities of the video itself as potentially offering viewer-listeners some specific or vaguely defined benefits. In the former category, the labor performed by content creators entails the use of video cameras to select and store the visual (and, to a lesser extent, auditory) "information" of specific minerals. CrystalTok content creators will also often engage in a kind of ekphrastic narration, describing the physical appearance of specific minerals (or in some cases, specific "pieces") using highly subjective and poetic language. Meanwhile, the latter category of healing sensations, having to do with the healing qualities of videos themselves, is most apparent in CrystalTok's overlapping with a range of other emergent categories of online videos, such as ASMR and sound-healing videos. Here, the premise that viewer-listeners might ever acquire specific healing crystals of their own becomes less of a priority than viewers' immediate sensory encounters with sounds and images via screens and speakers. In ASMR and frequency-based sound-healing videos, a fixation on the specific and combinatorial yet also highly subjective character of particular kinds of objects, in how they might be applied by individual users throughout their daily lives, migrates from healing crystals, as a unique class of objects, to any audiovisual stimuli that might lend themselves to transmission via mundane computational interfaces.

The third and final form of healing associated with CrystalTok that this paper examines is a posited invisible realm of energies and spirits. Whereas the first form of healing discussed in this paper has to do with the exchange of specific language and meanings, ostensibly related to but distinct from the "actual" world of energy/spirits that crystal-users tap into, other parts of CrystalTok seem to more radically embrace the notion that different kinds of energy, while perhaps being still tied to different kinds of healing crystals, can be sent and received remotely along pathways that audiovisual platforms help to lay out or establish. This basic concept, seen also in Reiki healing videos, and in numerous other emergent categories of online video, clarifies, among other things, CrystalTok's connections to practices and beliefs that have historically been associated with the New Age movement. These include: a prioritization of subjective self-efficacy (Bowman, 2007) as the ultimate measure of truth or reality; the individualized use of global supply-chains and information networks to build, and perpetually reconfigure, "spiritual toolboxes" (Bowman, 2007); and a professed skepticism toward Western rationality and mainstream technoscience (Ivakhiv, 2007; Hanegraaf, 2007).

To conclude, I reflect on this broader conjuncture, focusing especially on certain resonances between the third form of healing, related to a posited invisible world of energy or spirit that can be strategically accessed by "users," and various contemporary phenomena, including, especially: the COVID-19 global pandemic; the global climate crisis; global finance; and the near ubiquitousness of algorithmic systems and AI in certain parts of the world. Contrary to framings of contemporary capitalism as being centrally reliant upon "immaterial" forms of production, what the example of CrystalTok ultimately illustrates, I argue, is the continued importance of various kinds of physical commodities—be they healing crystal "pieces" or smartphone screens and speakers—to the platformized world, and the creator economies that platforms make possible.

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CONTENT CREATORS AS CUSTODIANS: THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL INFLUENCERS IN CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS IN INDIA

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Digitally connected India, considered the world’s largest democratic electorate with over 900 million people registered voters, is more active online than ever before. It is fairly established that internet, access to information, technology, and fact-checking have been pivotal in shaping the electoral landscape in the country. The 2014 election was named the ‘first social media election’ in the country (Rodrigues, 2015). In the 2019 election, WhatsApp played a significant role in creating political communities (Sarma &

Hazarika, 2023). We continued witnessing this change in the 2024 general elections with YouTubers constituting one of the key components of the Right-wing political party Bharatiya Janata Party's (Indian People's Party)(BJP henceforth) campaign network. Scholars from computational social science researching influencer and political discourse in India have argued that the more polarised the influencers, the more their popularity (Dash et al., 2022). Yet scholarship on media history, notes how social media has structurally shifted allowing politicians to find alternate routes to directly communicate with the electorate (Rodrigues, 2020). However, none of these works has engaged with the central question of how such regional YouTubers transform political engagement in a diverse socio-political state such as India. Inherently, the scholarship on influencers and political discourse characterises them as a conduit or as an alternate partisan, distributing propaganda mostly, underplaying their role in driving a significant transition in the way the electorate is involved in it through them. Influencers play a crucial role due to their extensive reach, accessibility, and ability to connect with diverse demographics, particularly young people. Without an adequate examination of influencers as a crucial figure in this political communication, we would fail to comprehensively account for this shift. This presentation thus analyses the intellectual production of YouTube influencers during important national events such as the elections.

Through an ethnography of a specific set of such Indian Influencers, and placing them within the context of labour studies, digital culture studies and media infrastructure studies, I argue that YouTube influencers have a significant impact on shaping political perspectives in their local communities, which is often exploited by political parties, especially in countries with authoritarian tendencies such as India. It aims to critically analyse the relationship between local digital cultures and global networks, showing how communities with complex historical backgrounds become part of these networks, which are increasingly being utilized to further larger authoritarian agendas mobilised through economic imperative. This presentation further delves into how labor is becoming more integrated into the development of such distribution networks, leading to a shift in the perception of social involvement by content creators. Social media consultants believe local is key since influencers can build one-on-one trust with their audiences.

These creators, aided by their 'authentic' identity, rootedness and their roles 'as custodians of culture, tradition, and local narratives' (2023), through their content on their everyday issues 'humanise the politicians' while, at times, underhandedly dealing with propaganda (Khan et al., 2024). This paper argues that the regional counterparts of these Indian influencers, who serve as both entertainers and political commentators, increasingly represent an emergent class of 'creative entrepreneurs' epitomizing aspirational labour (Duffy, 2016). Their local connection allows them to wield significant influence in connecting with regional audiences and shaping political perspectives. In an ascending authoritarian state such as India, this augments the right-wing socio-political refrains.

These influencers generate substantial income by endorsing political messages and sharing political content. However, content creators, during their promotional activities, often do away with transparency even as some influencers express apprehensions about facing criticism or negative feedback from political parties. A June 2024 investigative report, focuses on a category of right-wing YouTubers who use vox-pop style videos in specific locations in the capital Delhi to circulate hateful and Hindu-nationalist narratives (Ranjan, 2024). This kind of social engagement, born through the confluence of the coming of technology and geography; and the transnational and the global, presents the challenges and risks of an increasingly networked society, more so in the Global South. The study of these influencers from India illustrates the formation of new social actors, aesthetics, and socio-political implications as it looks at the local digital space as a site for examining politics, aspirations, experiences, and media narratives. In the process, they generate a creative, albeit mundane manner of social engagement expanding the objectives of the authoritarian state. The state, in turn, actively promotes and rewards such engagement as can be seen in a recent example where, in September 2024, the largest electorate, the state of Uttar Pradesh in north India, announced a new social media policy encouraging influencers to promote the State government's initiatives, schemes, and achievements with prize payments.

Research Questions

1. In a right-wing state such as India, what roles do YouTube influencers increasingly play in shaping the electoral landscape?
2. How does this role transform social engagement in a technopolitical state?

Rationale

This presentation looks at politics and civil society in contemporary India as it emerges as the world's second-largest internet user base and shows the connections and opportunities in an increasingly networked country. In the process, it demonstrates how aspiration, politics and profitability converge to affect socio-political consequences. This work thus addresses a socially relevant issue of the potential advantages and disadvantages of influencers' involvement in the electoral process. In an increasingly online world, a party must show voters real-world evidence that it has the support of other voters like them. Voters see real-world evidence as vital in evaluating a party's fit with their interests. Voters also interpret physical campaigning as indicative of a party's prospects for electoral success. In the digital age, political parties can use social media to extend the impact of their rallies beyond the event itself, reaching voters and shaping perceptions through online content. With over 800 million internet users and the world's largest presence on Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, it has become imperative for political parties to woo social media influencers to echo their messages to a wider audience.

Conclusion

My scholarship on the regional influencers in India reveals their redefining of the political mobilisation in contemporary India which often bleeds into the right-wing rhetoric in the country. By focusing on them, this presentation brings forth a marginalised perspective on the global digital culture and illustrates the specific challenges that materialise in countries of the Global South as technology and geopolitics collide thus contributing to the debates about the complex nature of political communication in an increasingly networked Global South.

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