

## **Online Entertainment: A New Wave of Media Globalization?**

### *Introduction*

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This article considers the phenomena of global online screen entertainment platforms in the context of enduring debates in communication and media studies concerning media globalization. While the relatively frictionless globality of such phenomena demands attention, we stress the differences between such platforms and the system of national broadcasting, film, and DVD release and licensing by windowing and territory. The latter, established forms of global media, enter territories with IP-controlled content, whereas platforms such as YouTube exhibit facilitation rather than content control and much greater content, creator, service firm, and language and cultural diversity than traditional global media hegemony. The article introduces the Special Section and argues that we are witnessing the rise of a proto-media industry that represents nontraditional media ownership, disruptive platforms, and unique content innovation that challenges our prior conceptions of media globalization, including national regulatory regimes.

*Keywords: media globalization, media imperialism, social media entertainment, Chinese online entertainment, Indian online entertainment, cross-cultural communication analysis*

For the past two decades, the United States has dominated the global online entertainment scene, owning and operating the world's largest digital television portals (HBO Now, Netflix, Amazon Video) and social media platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter). These portals and platforms have circumnavigated the planet with near frictionless ease. Netflix has 80 million subscribers in 190 countries and represents itself as "the birth of a new global Internet TV service." But these numbers pale in comparison to social media platforms such as YouTube, which features 1 billion users in 88 countries and 76 languages. YouTube is a distant second to Facebook, with more than 1.7 billion users, which represents more than half of the global online population. Meanwhile, new U.S.-owned platforms are scaling even

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more rapidly; for example, SnapChat has secured more than 200 million users in half the time it took Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter (Morrison, 2015).

With global domination nigh, arguably the last frontier for these platforms to conquer is China, where state-based regulation has helped incubate, protect, and censor the digital and social media industries. Parented by the Chinese BATs (Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent), Chinese online entertainment features an even more hypercompetitive landscape than in the West. Keane (this Special Section) describes the rise of digital TV platforms (iQiyi, Sohu, LeTV, and more), whereas Zhao (this Special Section) accounts for the proliferation of Chinese social media platforms (Youku Toudu, Weibo, WeChat). In Craig and Li's interview with Heng Cai, a Chinese social media entrepreneur (this Special Section), Cai confirms that there are already 116 Chinese live broadcasting mobile apps, roughly 100 more than in the United States. All these portals and platforms are competing for the 700 million Chinese mobile Web users, roughly twice the population of the United States, "or, if you prefer, 28 Australias" (Scutt, 2015, para. 10).

These NoCal-based interlopers (Silicon Valley, with its focus on scale, automation, and iterative, pivoting "permanent beta") and their Chinese counterparts represent the new "King Kongs" of media distribution (Cunningham & Silver, 2013) and posit arguably the greatest peril to the imperious content kings of Hollywood's SoCal media conglomerates (which exemplify premium content and mass entertainment appeal). These deeply capitalized, aggressively disruptive, tech-focused players would seem to affirm the next wave of American media imperialism. Yet the potential U.S. hegemony over online entertainment features a host of considerations well beyond control over online media distribution.

Even with U.S.-owned distribution, Internet regulation focused on concerns over access, content, and advertising on these platforms is subject to complex, disparate, variegated, incompatible, and often inconsistent regional and national state-based mediation. The state of Turkey takes a particularly strong interventionist stance with regard to the potential disruption to the political, religious, and social order posed by the global-spanning digital platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and has regularly blocked them around election periods and particularly during the current major crisis in its political system (Coldewey, 2016). Turkish Tourism, however, had a YouTube channel from February 2014, and the national carrier, Turkish Airlines, has used YouTube content creators and multichannel networks in developing youth-oriented, social media-based engagement strategies in its attempt to build brand recognition in the ultracompetitive international airline market (Kerr, 2012).

While operating off of U.S.-owned social media platforms, international content creators have proliferated and profited, representing marginal, alternative, subcultural, and subaltern voices rarely seen in the United States or, in many cases, in traditional entertainment in their own countries. Musicians like Elissa from Lebanon or Iranian Saudi Arabian a cappella artist Alaa Wardi or comedians Bader Sadeh, also known as the "Saudi King of Comedy," have launched global careers and secured cross-cultural and diasporic Middle Eastern audiences less inhibited by local online platform or content censorship. An Australian multichannel network works with aspiring online musicians in their attempts to break into the booming Asian pop scene. As described by Kumar in this Special Section, India has experienced "breakneck growth" of amateur content creation. According to *The New York Times*, Asian American

YouTubers have dominated this space, in stark contrast to their near invisibility in traditional entertainment (Considine, 2011).

To borrow from Friedman (2005), this new world of online entertainment may be far from flat, and a new wave of media globalization may, at best, prove to be a ripple, a consequence of the disruptive undulations of technology and media capital and innovation in the digital age.

### **New Media Imperialism?**

Media globalization has been an enduring topic in film and media studies. Traditionally centered on questions of U.S. "cultural imperialism" through widespread dissemination and popularity of its film and television output, debates of long-established vintage have been staged, for example, around whether global television traffic is a "one-way street" (Nordenstreng & Varis, 1974) or a "patchwork quilt" (Tracey, 1988). Influenced by cultural studies' emphasis on viewer and audience agency, versions of "weak" rather than "strong" globalization that have largely characterized recent discussion (Flew, 2007; Straubhaar, 2007; Tomlinson, 1999) continue to contend with reassertions of "strong" globalization (Boyd-Barrett, 2015).

However, a reassessment of this debate is imperative in the light of the relatively frictionless global reach of YouTube and other major platforms and the innovative content they have spawned. On the one hand, it is possible to posit a new wave of media globalization based on the global availability and uptake of YouTube—and other major social media platforms, which are increasingly encouraging the upload of video content—which is relatively frictionless compared with national broadcasting and systems of film and DVD licensing by territory. Apart from substantial self-regulation to avoid controversy over content offending community standards, there is little or no content regulation of Google/YouTube—one of the world's largest information and communication companies—as its use proliferates globally. On the other hand, the new professionalizing-amateur screen ecology embodies a huge change in producer diversity, both in terms of amateur backgrounds and global locations. It is the differences that we stress between such content and platforms, and the system of national broadcasting, film, and DVD release and licensing by windowing and territory. The latter, established forms of media globalization, enter territories with IP-controlled content, whereas platforms such as YouTube exhibit facilitation rather than content control and much greater content, creator, service firm, and language and cultural diversity than traditional global media hegemony.

The implications of social media entertainment for traditional academic accounts of media imperialism have been barely touched on. Mostly, the lead has been taken by exponents of *very strong* media imperialism theses. Critical political economists Christian Fuchs (2014) and Dal Yong Jin (2013) insist on the strong continuity between earlier media imperialism and today's version; the question of the contemporary nature of global online content—and its creators—is not considered.

For Fuchs (2013), social media are viewed entirely through the lens of their claims to democratize access to and participation in information exchange:

The Internet and social media are today stratified, non-participatory spaces and an alternative, non-corporate Internet is needed. Large corporations colonize social media and dominate its attention economy. . . . On corporate social media, the liberal freedom of association and assembly are suspended: big corporate and, to a lesser extent, political actors dominate and therefore centralize the formation of speech, association, assembly and opinion on social media. (p. 102)

For Jin (2013), there is essential continuity across a century of imperialisms (Lenin's imperialism, cultural imperialism, information imperialism, and now platform imperialism). "The U.S, which had previously controlled non-Western countries with its military power, capital, and later cultural products," Jin argues, "now seems to dominate the world with platforms, benefitting from these platforms, mainly in terms of capital accumulation" (p. 145). He regards "the major role of intellectual property rights as the most significant form of capital accumulation in the digital age" (p. 146). But there are critical distinctions to be made between information and cultural dominance, and, at least at the level of content, global social media entertainment must be critically differentiated from earlier stages of cultural imperialism because such content is initially primarily amateur and is generated under very different intellectual property (IP) regimes than the strong copyright regimes through which traditional media hegemony has been exercised.

In contending with such contemporary accounts of "platform imperialism," we have focused in this Special Section on China, which represents a singular and central exception to notions of U.S. platform imperialism, and India, which together with China constitutes one of the two largest emerging non-Western online spaces in the world and whose online cultural sphere is one of intense localization. This Special Section also advocates for cross-cultural analyses, whether comparative reception studies of sociability (Schroeder) or new methodological approaches for conducting social media content analysis (Shifman). These articles complement our concerns over media globalization to examine the shared and communal practices around the formations of social media audiences and innovation of social media platforms.

### **Social Media Entertainment, or "Communitainment"**

The emerging shape of screen industries in the 21st century encapsulates deep changes in consumer habit and expectation and content production related "to a larger trend across the media industries to integrate digital technology and socially networked communication with traditional screen media practices" (Holt & Sanson, 2013, p. 1). For this reason, while digital television platforms represent direct competition to traditional television networks and channels, our primary focus here is with the emergence of the protoindustry of social media entertainment. Over the past decade, scholars have accounted for commercialized uses of YouTube, user-generated content, and social media platforms (Burgess, 2013; Burgess & Green, 2009; van Dijck, 2013; Wasko & Erickson, 2009). Building upon their scholarship, Cunningham, Craig, and Silver (2016) have engaged in identifying and mapping the new screen ecology of a protoindustry—social media entertainment (SME).

SME is built upon the technological, networking, and commercial affordances of multiple, rapidly scaling, near-frictionless, global social media platforms—for example, YouTube, Facebook, SnapChat, and

Twitch. A rapidly professionalizing and monetizing wave of diverse, multicultural, previously amateur content creators from around the world have harnessed these platforms to incubate their own media brands, engage in content innovation, and cultivate often massive, transnational, and cross-cultural fan communities. Our research, conducted over the past two years, features unprecedented access to industry players, including more than 135 interviews with platform executives, content creators, and diverse SME managers, producers, agents, and analysts, who have helped launch and grow this protoindustry.

We alternatively define this field of cultural production as *communitainment*. This term reflects the dynamics of a protoindustry facilitated by networked *communications* technologies (social media platforms), primary strategies of *communication* as much as content (intense interactivity), more discursive and *communicative* content genres and formats (most notably, vlogging), and driven by an ethos of *community* (an ecology where fans, subscribers, and supporters directly constitute the communities that trigger the sustainability of content creator careers). This term further distinguishes this industry from the professionally generated content strategies of Netflix, Amazon, Apple, and others. In effect, these online television portals are delivering old wine in new bottles—that is, traditionally formatted film and television digital online portals featuring alternative forms of programming, curation, and audience analytics.

We further argue that the emerging shape of screen industries in the 21st century shows established players, norms, principles, and practices ceding significant power and influence to the social media platforms. Just as notably, these platforms, preeminently YouTube, have started to represent a greater value proposition to the advertising industry that has served as the bulwark for legacy media since the middle of the last century. Across these on-demand, ephemeral, and live broadcasting platforms, creator entrepreneurs engage in content innovation in contrast to traditional entertainment, without little interest in developing original intellectual property or building content libraries. This new screen ecology is driven by intrinsically interactive, viewer- and audience-centricity. Combined, these factors inform a qualitatively different globalization dynamic that has scaled with great velocity, posing new challenges for screen regulatory regimes, not to mention media scholars.

Our research seeks to anatomize this emerging protoindustry based on the YouTube platform, taking an “ecological” approach by investigating the interdependencies among its elements: mapping the platforms and affordances, content innovation and creative labor, monetization and management, new forms of media globalization, and critical cultural concerns raised by this nascent media industry. The article contributes well-evidenced revisionist accounts in the political economy of new media (the clash of cultures of globally dominant media and IT corporations); constructs an account of short form commercializing online video culture as a highly normative space driven by appeals to authenticity and community; extends the debate on creative labor to include the precariousness of certain forms of media management; and assesses claims for a new wave of media globalization achieved without IP control.

We take full account of structural conditions—huge, globe-spanning online platforms whose leaders are far bigger than the Hollywood majors that have had a dominating influence on global media; a fast-advancing algorithmic culture; and the precariousness of online labor—but we are really driven by a commitment to new voices, the small businesses, the amateurs developing what they hope may be

sustainable careers. We are interested in tracking cultural progressivity where it finds space within commercializing systems. Ample evidence suggests that we are finding those voices, businesses, and careers to a larger extent in the online social media entertainment space than in older, established global media orders.

The scale and significance of this industry posits continuities and discontinuities with established understandings of media globalization. While the relatively frictionless globality of such phenomena demands attention, we stress the differences between such platforms and the system of national broadcasting, film, and DVD release and licensing by windowing and territory. We therefore argue against the notion that it provides a platform for new forms of cultural hegemony. Traditional media and television have been characterized by its hegemonic domination of distribution and IP-controlled content informed by media scarcity, highly capitalized ownership, and captured regulatory regimes. In contrast, open social media platforms like YouTube feature content abundance and near-unlimited access—conditions that generate agency and affordances creators and offer greater cultural and language diversity.

It additionally considers how multisited, globalizing trends in social media communications are being approached not only in media and cultural studies but in broader communication studies frameworks, which include psychology, political science, and political communication and which engage from a domestication-of-technologies approach complemented by a comparative-historical perspective on technologies for sociability as well as theories of ritual interaction and connected presence (Schroeder's and Shifman's articles in this Special Section).

It is possible to posit a qualitatively new wave of media globalization based on the global availability and uptake of platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter and which is relatively frictionless compared to national broadcasting and systems of film and DVD release and licensing by "windowed" territory (Cunningham, 2015). And compared to traditional film and television, there is very little imposed content regulation beyond self-regulation—apart from content ID on Google/YouTube and now Facebook—as their use as content distributors proliferates globally.

Compare SME with the major professionally generated content streaming services such as Netflix. Its aggressive global expansion requires it to negotiate with preexisting rights holders in each new territory and often requires it to attempt to close down informal means of accessing its popular content such as VPN workarounds in such territories. Nonetheless, the platform's impressive colonization of 190 countries is remarkable. In contrast, SME content is largely "born global." This is because this massively growing content industry, in stark contrast to content industries in general and Hollywood and broadcast television in particular, is not primarily based on IP control. Rather, YouTube elected to avoid the messy and legally cumbersome traditional media model of owned or shared IP. YouTube also avoided paying fees for content as well as offering back-end residual or profit participation. Rather, YouTube entered into "partnership agreements" with its content creators based on a split of advertising revenue from first dollar. This strategy has proven effective. In the eight years since the partner plan launched, YouTube has secured more than 2 million YouTube partners worldwide who derive some revenue from their uploaded content.

YouTube talks of being primarily a facilitator of creators and content in the many international markets in which it operates. The key difference between traditional media operating multinationally and YouTube is that the former produces, owns, or licenses content for distribution, exhibition, or sale in multiple territories, while the latter seeks to avoid the conflation of YouTubers as the IP creators with YouTube as both platform and middleman operating to facilitate the linking of brands and advertisers with YouTube creators and multichannel networks. There are significant reasons for YouTube not taking an IP ownership position, which have to do with its continued status as a platform or online service provider rather than a content company. The U.S. Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998, in addition to criminalizing circumvention measures and heightening the penalties for copyright infringement on the Internet, created “safe harbor” provisions for online service providers (including Internet service providers) against copyright infringement liability, provided they responsibly block access to alleged infringing material on receipt of infringement claims from a rights holder.

YouTube’s lack of conventional IP control has not, of course, inhibited its monetization strategies, which other SME platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and SnapChat are emulating. These monetization strategies have exposed the faltering codependency between media and advertising, reflecting the inefficiencies of traditional media advertising while highlighting the affordances and targeted efficacy of online analytics. Throughout its AdSense and TruView technology, Google first initiated programmatic advertising—the automation of ad buying and placement through the deployment of big data analytics—which it simply extended to YouTube upon acquisition. Facebook followed suit, although shifting from an open to closed ecosystem with the Facebook Audience Network ad tech system (Sloan, 2016). Programmatic ad sales enable platforms to generate great efficiencies in matching advertising to digital content as content travels virtually seamlessly across borders and regions. As Hector Postigo ironizes:

YouTube (or any platforms that invite UGC [user-generated content] for its inventory) is not unlike a bettor at a roulette table who is in the happy position of betting on all the numbers, where the payout *in aggregate* outweighs what appears to be an otherwise wild investment. (2016, p. 15)

Online social media entertainment content is being distributed globally in ways that radically depart from time-honored principles and practices of territorial rights and indeed of traditional IP control. We are witnessing the rise of a nascent media industry that represents nontraditional media ownership, disruptive platforms, and content innovation that challenge our prior conceptions of media globalization, including nationalized regulatory regimes. However, such relatively frictionless globality seen in the operations of the major digital platforms is decidedly uneven. SME platforms seek not to create or own intellectual property and are subject to significant “lumpiness” in business culture and regulatory frameworks across the globe.

YouTube reports that it is “localized” in multiple countries and numerous languages (i.e., it has a local presence, usually consisting of sales forces and government/public relations operatives). Of course, this is not a full index of the global reach—or limits—of YouTube. YouTube is accessed and used across much wider territory than localization data show, while a number of countries block or restrict access to YouTube. (Those that do so tend to also block access to Twitter and/or Facebook.) North Korea (where

Internet access itself is highly restricted) and China (except for the Shanghai Free Trade Zone) block YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. As we have seen, temporary blocking at a national level has always been an option used to deal with political and/or religious issues. In the last few years, Pakistan blocked YouTube when it refused to remove an anti-Islamic video, and Eritrea, Iran, Egypt, the Congo, Tajikistan, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Morocco have instituted temporary bans.<sup>1</sup>

As well as the need to deal with global politico-cultural divergences of this order, localization is also a response to preexisting entertainment content being subject to "location-based filtering that results from the unevenness of content-licensing deals across national jurisdictions" (Burgess, 2013, p. 53). Location-based filtering is usually geoblocking, which occurs when rights holders and/or content producers may not have the rights to show some content in different regions. The most prominent case of geoblocking is an ongoing dispute with YouTube and GEMA, a performance rights organization in Germany.

Variegated media regulation and policy are helping to shape, restrict, and censor, as well as assist this emergent industry. Europe, the Middle East, and Africa (dubbed EMEA in the dialect of globalizers) are much more regulated in terms of community standards, sponsorship, and advertising than the United States. The relative free-for-all in branded content and sponsorship in the United States is by no means mirrored elsewhere. These are the same "glocalization" dynamics seen in multinational advertising debates for decades, with the difference that the dollar value is at this stage of the monetization of digital content worldwide much lower, and thus the "education" of brands and advertisers is required to be that much more strategic.

In the U.S. system, the dual regulatory regimes of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) complicate matters, creating confusion and anxiety among platforms, creators, intermediaries, and advertisers. The FCC's concerns over net neutrality providing full access is impacted by the FTC's Child Online Protection and Child Online Privacy Protection rules limiting children's access.

### **Neither Hollywood nor Bollywood**

Outside the United States, in addition to outright, strategic, and temporary blocks on the digital platforms, national and regional regulation can sometimes create friction that challenges the globalizing imperatives of these platforms. India's rejection of Facebook's self-aggrandizing efforts to provide free, but limited, online access to the market was rejected even as the country still suffers from limited, irregular, and expensive access despite interventionist efforts by the government such as the Digital India Programme. These state-based interventionist efforts have, nonetheless, nurtured an SME industry operating with national, cultural, and subculture distinctions from the U.S. and Western versions, as reflected in Kumar's essay in this Special Section.

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<sup>1</sup> Data on these matters vary; however, Google posts traffic disruptions to its site at <http://www.google.com/transparencyreport/traffic/disruptions/#expand=Y2015,Y2014,Y2013,Y201>.



India is a global incubator of IT talent. In 2016, the chief executives of Alphabet (Google), Microsoft, MasterCard, Adobe, and SanDisk are all Indian-born. (One in three residents of Silicon Valley are first-generation migrants.) But, while nurturing the growth of U.S.-owned platforms, the success of global Indians in IT abroad has further contributed to a booming Internet economy back home. Chennai-born and -raised Google chief executive Sundar Pichai's interest in India is obvious: There are already more Indian than American Internet users, with several hundred million still unconnected. And Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's interest in the digital platforms is equally clear: Digital India will have to be largely built on corporate investment.

It is estimated that India will become the youngest country in the world by 2020, and it already has the world's largest population in the age 10 to 24 demographic. Although vast numbers of Indian youth are moving online, connectivity remains significantly underdeveloped. 4G and corresponding data speeds are yet to be rolled out in India. In addition to speeds, the cost of mobile telephony and streaming plans remains prohibitively high, despite the rapid growth of the Indian middle class, limiting access to online video mainly to urban dwellers and cosmopolitan youth. However, with the imminent rollout of 4G mobile, there is expected to be an unparalleled ramp-up of new voices online and on mobile.

The technological and economic limitations of the Indian mobile market may only temporarily inhibit the growth of Indian SME, whereas the lack of diversity and access to India's traditional film, television, and music industries may further accelerate it. Bollywood has dominated Indian film for decades, inhibiting new genres, stars, voices, and formats. Representing a limited form of vertical media integration, over 70% of all music released in India is filmed music, foreclosing alternative genres such as Indian rap, pop, or hip-hop. Despite 850 channels vying for attention and the advertising rupee, Indian television remains focused on older audiences and traditional format and content, including prime-time soap operas and political news discourse. In numerous accounts, our interviewees deride hegemonic Indian popular discourse as ABCD—astrology, Bollywood, cricket, and devotional.

As a consequence, Indian millennials have turned off television, migrated online, and begun to create content outside these national and indeed global expressions of Indianness, grounded in hyperlocal regionalism, millennial popular interests, and sharp satire. Indian SME has fostered wave of new voices, genres, and formats alternative to traditional Indian film, TV, and music, albeit representing more mainstream genres seen in the West. The earliest creators in this space featured stand-up comedians and alternative musicians, who first harnessed YouTube to promote their concerts and performances. In short order, these performers evolved into concert promoters and comedy tour agents, music labels, and talent agents and, more recently, multichannel networks, like OML (Only Much Louder). OML produces India's largest circuit of Weekender music festivals, while representing numerous pop, rap, and hip-hop music acts and representing and producing content featuring India's most popular comedy troupes, All India Bakchod and East India Comedy.

Similarly, the dearth of scripted television comedy tailored for millennial audiences has nurtured the unlikely success of scripted online Web series, such as *Permanent Roommates* produced by The Viral Fever. Other traditional genres that emerged online include regional food culture, like the Indian Food Network, fostered by the Mumbai-based PING network in partnership with Tastemade, a U.S.-based food-

themed multichannel network. OML and PING represent a wave of highly differentiating media intermediaries operating within this new ecosystem, jockeying for space, value, brand equity, and, most urgently, creators, advertisers, and audiences.

In turn, these conditions have further contributed to platform dominance, enticing YouTube to launch another of its creator-focused YouTube Spaces in Mumbai in 2016. The space is dedicated to "democratizing access," according to Jigisha Mistry Iyengar, the head of the space, helping further professionalize creators operating out of their living rooms by offering them digital studios featuring state-of-the-art technology and postproduction support. Ironically, the space shares facilities with Whispering Pines International, one of India's most prestigious film schools.

### **The Great Chinese Firewall or Tidal Wave?**

As with India, the contours and evolution of China's digital and social media industries have been fueled by the growth in China's economy and middle class. In the past 35 years, China has incubated, and cocooned, one of the largest experiments in autarkic development yet seen. In that period, China's per capita gross domestic product has grown 17 times over. Venture capital funds raised more than \$320 billion in 2015. In the past two years, China has opened 1,600 start-up incubators. Many of the current innovations in online commerce (e.g., QR codes, digital wallets), messaging, and live streaming have been incubated and popularized in China.

In many ways, China's singular and rapid development of its tech and online industries is due to the fact that

it was able to fill a vacuum after the country essentially created much of its economy from scratch following the end of the Cultural Revolution. Unlike in the United States where banks and retailers already have strongholds on customers, China's state-run lenders are inefficient, and retailers never expanded broadly enough to serve a fast-growing middle class. (Mozur, 2016, p. 81)

For this reason, there is a much more sustainable basis to monetization, as China can be characterized as a very much early-stage consumer culture. Outside the "first-tier" cities on the east coast, there is significant fall-away of major branded bricks-and-mortar consumer outlets, and thus e-commerce thrives. Competition among digital platforms is more intense than in the United States, because they are more unilaterally focused on mobile applications in a country that leads the world by far in mobile phone ownership and where the installed base of standard computers per capita is low.

As discussed by Michael Keane in this Special Section, China has built an alternative online ecosystem based on state-based intervention, which includes not only banning YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram but nurturing the growth of their own platforms. The government's digital economy strategy incubated the massive tech giants, the so-called BATs (Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent), which, in turn, either birthed or adopted multiple highly competitive online TV platforms. As a consequence of a highly charged, iterative, competing landscape, a number of online TV platforms have

since been aborted, including Ku6, and other platforms have pivoted aggressively toward a subscription-based, professionally generated content model—for example, iQiyi, LeTV, and Sohu. The latter platforms have not only engaged in a programming arms race over U.S. and Chinese film and television content; like Netflix and Amazon, China's iQiyi is producing high-stakes, expensive, "complex" TV (Mittell, 2015) that surpasses the audiences plugged in to their linear, terrestrial, satellite, and cable-distributed counterparts.

Meanwhile, as Zhao describes in this Special Section, platforms such as Youku Tudou have moved away from the more expensive and competitive professionally generated content portals to return to their original value proposition of user-generated content with social networking capabilities. Similar to the West, multiple social media platforms have launched to compete with or offer diverse affordances with Youku. China's game-play platforms such as Duoyu and PandaTV have already outpaced Western equivalents such as Twitch and YouTube Gaming while accelerating China's booming e-game industry. The live-broadcasting affordances of these platforms supercharged the launch of more than 100 live mobile applications in the past few years, which, in turn, contributed to a swift backlash from China's censors (Custer, 2015). What the state incubates, it may also abort.

Second-generation platforms such as Tencent's WeChat, China's formidable messenger service, have reverse-engineered platform development in the West. Facebook's purchase of WhatsApp messenger service for an exorbitant \$19 billion may have represented a defensive effort by the West to block Chinese platform penetration outside China's Great Firewall. In light of Chinese commitment to the soft power of media (Xi, 2014), Zuckerberg barely thwarted the first salvo in the art of a social media war rapidly looming on the digital horizon (Lunden, 2014).

Microblogging platform Weibo makes an interesting contrast with its U.S.-based counterpart Twitter. Like Twitter, Weibo is a text-based microblogging service that has been threatened repeatedly with demise from various competitors, not least of which being WeChat (Custer, 2016). Unlike Twitter, Weibo integrated photos and a video player into the platform from the beginning, which helped nurture key opinion leaders, Weibo personalities from throughout the public sphere, including entrepreneurs, politicians, and celebrities, engaging millions of Chinese netizens around the globe. With the proliferation of smartphones with 4G speed fostering 700 million subscriptions, leaping over Youku, Weibo has become the premiere platform for short video content, helping foster the advertising-defined "influencer" (Wanghong 网红) economy.

The Chinese influencer economy affirms how these platforms have helped create the technological and commercial conditions upon which an alternative Chinese social media entertainment industry (CSME) has emerged. CSME features rapidly professionalizing amateur Chinese content creators engaging in content innovation distinct from traditional Chinese film and television, like the aforementioned game players; food, fashion, and style vloggers; and a wave of social media celebrities. Once again, the Chinese state has engaged in tandem actions, nursing and disciplining these upstart microcelebrities, like the Chinese vlog queen, Ms. Papi (Jiang). Wrist-slapped by censors for foul language, Papi issued a message of contrition to her 11 million followers while simultaneously securing multimillions in investment and brand integration ("China Internet Star," 2016).

As in the West, the CSME industry coevolves alongside traditional Chinese media. In contrast to the United States, but comparable to India, the industry exploits the lack of diversity in traditional film and TV to feature more professionally generated traditional content, albeit in more affordable formats than traditional scripted fare. One of the most popular shows on Youku is *The Luogic Show*, a history and social issue-themed talk show hosted by former CCTV producer Luo Zhen Yu. *Baozoudashijian* is an entertainment show hosted by Baozoumanhua, who remains anonymous, emerging on-screen solely in a papier-mâché mask, providing arguably a brilliant ploy to thwart state censorship.

As in the West, a new wave of intermediaries operating between platforms, creators, advertisers, and traditional media have emerged. Unlike in the West, these firms also function as digital production companies generating original IP content across multiple platforms. Feidishuo features original animation designed for millennials, or rather 1980s and 1990s *balinghous* and *jiulinghuos* featuring mature topics around relationships, sex, and social pressure rarely discussed on Chinese TV ("China's Top Video Channel," 2015). Heng Cai (interviewed in this Special Section), a social media entrepreneur and partner in Star Station TV, discusses his company's multipronged strategy of developing its own vertical brands around sports, foods, antiques, and more, converting off-line experts into online influencers, and engaging in content marketing with leading brands and advertisers. Operating as both influencer agency and multichannel network, Xinpianchang also features its own content as well as not owned but nonetheless operated channels. Unlike their multichannel network counterparts that have been acquired by traditional media firms, these upstarts have accelerated through several rounds of investor financing, including courting Palo Alto-based VCs or, in the case of Xinpianchang, launching and securing an initial public offering (IPO) in Beijing's New Market exchange.

Investment, acquisition, or successful IPO launch are no guarantee of sustainability, however; Youku was recently bought back from the market and returned to the private sector. Based on interviews with senior personnel at Youku, this buyback affords the company greater leeway to pivot, innovate, disrupt, but mostly generate much-needed synergies with e-commerce partners in the Alibaba corporation, including T-mall and Taobao stores. In contrast to the West, along with the lucrative fan-funding virtual goods market fostered by the game-play platforms, influencer-fueled e-commerce monetization represents one of the more sustainable revenue strategies of CSME. Little surprise, then, that Amazon is trying to emulate Alibaba's Youku Taobao synergies by launching its own user-generated content platform, Video Direct. Like Facebook's WhatsApp messenger play, Amazon is operating on the defensive, trying to thwart a potential incursion from the online East.

As reflected by the strategic interplay between the U.S.-based and Western-oriented global and China's emergent SME industries, China's Great Firewall has fostered a playing field comprised of numerous major teams, players, rules, and skirmishes operating at the level of the domestic and the global—many of which are larger and some of which are more innovative than U.S. leaders in the field.

### Articles in This Special Section

Michael Keane, in "Disconnecting, Connecting, and Reconnecting: How Chinese Television Found Its Way Out of the Box," puts Chinese online culture into the wider context of the rapid evolution of Chinese television. Keane is concerned to balance views of Chinese exceptionalism by emphasizing continuities with other major evolutions in the television system:

My argument is that the Chinese television industry is moving through similar technological developments as those seen in the rest of the world, albeit with considerable restrictions on content and controls on investment from private capital.

He structures his article around the themes of disconnecting, connecting, and reconnecting. *Disconnecting* refers to the fact that, despite rapid commercialization and expansion of the system, the state unrepentantly intervenes to censor content deemed "unhealthy" or "harmful" before production or force offending content to be removed from screens. This causes online entrepreneurs, as the interview with Heng Cai brings out, as much as mainstream broadcasters to need to be agile and creative in the way they commission and produce content. On the other hand, *connecting* describes how audiences and users are finding ways to access a diversity of content, including content that is restricted. Finally, *reconnecting* deals with the way Chinese television has "got out of the box" and made its way overseas.

Jing Zhao's "Professionalization of Amateur Production in Online Screen Entertainment in China: Hopes, Frustrations, and Uncertainties" offers an analytical architecture for understanding the history of the online video space in China and its uneven professionalization. Initial enthusiasm for the possibilities of user-generated, amateur content saw a major correction when swathes of copyright-infringing content and platforms were closed down by the state in 2007–2008. Platforms swung, pendulum-like, to professionally generated content, but many struggled with the cost of licensing increasingly expensive licit content. Zhao focuses on the current period of the "resurgence and revalidation" of user-generated content. Online video production has rapidly come to offer alternatives to officially sanctioned institutions in cultural production, distribution, and consumption.

Many online video platforms, Zhao argues, have their roots in amateur practices, facilitating flows of content unavailable in the official marketplace. Her article draws on cases of productions by professionalizing amateurs to examine their creative strategies. By reflecting on professionalizing amateurs' experiences in negotiating creativity/commerce/community relations, platform politics, and the regulatory landscape, this article reveals the cultural and political implications of the professionalization of amateur content.

The conversation with Heng Cai conducted by David Craig and Junyi Lv provides insights into the strategy and operations of key intermediaries in the Chinese social media entertainment space—that is, the so-called multichannel networks. Cai is a partner in Star Station TV, a multichannel network that creates its own content and owns or manages 14 verticals—that is, channels dedicated to a single topic, including sport, fashion, education, and lifestyle, which had garnered more than 438 million views by the end of 2015. The firm partners with advertisers and creators to produce and distribute content across all

major platforms, including Youku, Weibo, Bilibili, iQiyi, and Maopai. Notwithstanding this, it does not regard itself as an IP generator; it adds value through facilitating access to advertising, developing talent, and strategic media management while also dealing with Chinese media regulation in its guise as both censor and protector. Cai forensically enumerates five ways the government seeks to manage online video.

Sangeet Kumar's "YouTube Nation: Creation, Agency, and Precarity in India's Online Video Scene" navigates several overlapping questions in mapping the development of social media entertainment in India. Kumar sees it as "gradually chipping away" at the structural dominance of institutions such as Bollywood, television networks, and the celebrity culture that have remained the hegemonic forces within the sphere of cultural production in India. Like Zhao on China's online producers, Kumar provides diverse snapshots of creative entrepreneurs on India's YouTube. In doing so, the article showcases particular forms of agentic subjectivity that arise from common citizens unconnected to professional media industries who are able to carve a cultural and communicative space for themselves. Kumar looks to fully acknowledge the tendencies of capital but eschews the doctrinaire divide positioning the consumer and the citizen in an irresolvable either/or binary.

The articles by Keane, Zhao, and Kumar and the interview with Cai work largely within, and seek to respond to, theories and debates mostly derived from media and cultural studies. Ralph Schroeder's article, "The Globalization of On-screen Sociability: Social Media and Tethered Togetherness," is a departure, with Schroeder considering the globalizing dynamics of social network sites from a domestication-of-technologies approach complemented by a comparative-historical perspective on technologies for sociability as well as theories of ritual interaction and connected presence. Schroeder offers a careful, judicious overview of claims, debates, and findings about "on-screen sociability" in the context of comparative insights from four countries: the United States, Sweden, India, and China. Schroeder is concerned to rebalance much debate in the social sciences, which has focused on deviant behavior, such as bullying, and issues requiring policy interventions, especially privacy. The vast bulk of social uses, he says, are unlike these. He posits a divide between the "relative degradation" of the mobile-only social media experience in India and China and the multimodal experience (mobile device plus computer) practiced by Western users.

Like Schroeder, Limor Shifman's "Cross-Cultural Comparisons of User-Generated Content: An Analytical Framework" is also concerned to essay an analytical framework to deal with cross-cultural comparisons of user-generated content, which she describes as a "conceptual and empirical minefield." Drawing on a broad communication studies framework that includes psychology, political science, and political communication that has usually been applied to the analysis of news and advertisements, but adding analytical frames more typically applied to one-on-one/less mediated forms of human communication, Shifman analyzes note-card confessions and recut trailers through a cross-linguistic comparative analysis. Carefully stepping through a repertoire of analytical tools, she exemplifies how genres function both as "models of writing" for authors and as "horizons of expectations" for readers. Genres are "revealing sociocultural testimonies." The central importance for Shifman of digital culture is that the ones who produce it are also often the ones that consume and interpret it. Shifman may be regarded as offering a middle-way alternative to, on the one hand, big data analytics and "distant" reading

as an answer to the scale and chaos of user-generated content and, on the other, an anecdotal or tendentious focus on nonrepresentative sampling.

Both Schroeder and Shifman are looking to delve deeper than usual comparative exercises can at the cultural roots that drive different uses of and engagements with social media. They add significantly to this Special Section's understanding of the cultural and communicative diversity arising from globalizing social media.

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