The Nested Precarities of Creative Labor on Social Media

Brooke Erin Duffy[1] , Annika Pinch[2] , Shruti Sannon[3], and Megan Sawey[1]

Abstract

While metrics have long played an important, albeit fraught, role in the media and cultural industries, quantified indices of online visibility—likes, favorites, subscribers, and shares—have been indelibly cast as routes to professional success and status in the digital creative economy. Against this backdrop, this study sought to examine how creative laborers' pursuit of social media visibility impacts their processes and products. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 30 aspiring and professional content creators on a range of social media platforms—Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Pinterest, and Twitter—we contend that their experiences are not only shaped by the *promise* of visibility, but also by its *precarity*. As such, we present a framework for assessing the volatile nature of visibility in platformized creative labor, which includes unpredictability across three levels: (1) markets, (2) industries, and (3) platform features and algorithms. After mapping out this ecological model of the nested precarities of visibility, we conclude by addressing both continuities with—and departures from—the earlier modes of instability that characterized cultural production, with a focus on the guiding logic of platform capitalism.

Keywords

platforms, creative labor, algorithms, visibility, social media metrics

Introduction

In early 2020, as the global pandemic began to wreak havoc on contemporary labor markets and economies, a number of high-profile publications began to prognosticate the fate of a relatively new category of cultural producer: social media creators. Rather hyperbolically, a feature in *Vanity Fair* headlined, "Is this the end of influencing as we knew it?" (Bryant, 2020). A senior writer at *Wired* meanwhile, forecasted the uncertain career prospects for professional Instagrammers given that "brand deals have dried up; sponsored posts have been delayed" (Pardes, 2020). Other analysts highlighted the temporality of the platforms themselves, and—in particular—TikTok, which was mired in controversy with a rumored sale and threats of political bans in both India and the United States. In an *MIT Technology Review* report on the platform's shaky future, Abby Ohlheiser (2020) summarized, "Whether the app goes or stays, this moment is forcing creators . . . toward a realization that making, or even consuming, things on the Internet means depending on platforms that could change drastically in an instant" (para. 5). Then, in a nod toward the fickle algorithmic systems that structure creator-centric platforms, she added, "Small algorithmic changes by a platform can make or tank an entire career" (Ohlheiser, 2020).

Taken together, such reports underscore a fundamental reality of careers borne on social media: they are profoundly volatile, bound up with fluctuations in wider socio-economic, cultural, and political realms. Such instability, of course, well predates these platforms; that is, careers in the creative industries have long been marked by intermittent or piecemeal work, low and/or deferred wages, and the cautionary mantra that "you're only as good as your last [gig]" (Blair, 2001; Gill, 2010; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013; McRobbie, 2016). Indeed, more than 15 years ago, Neff et al. (2005) described how new media workers face patterned "uncertainty and lack of control"—forms of risk offset by what workers view as "the promise of one Big Job being right around the corner" (p. 319). But today's platformized creative economy—powered by a neoliberal ethos of self-commodification, the recasting of independent employment as "entrepreneurship," and an

[1]Cornell University, USA
[2]Northwestern University, USA
[3]Drexel University, USA

Corresponding Author:
Brooke Erin Duffy, Cornell University, 478 Mann Library Building, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA.
Email: bduffy@cornell.edu

creators thus treated them as suspect, at best. For instance, Gitlin (1983) details prime-time TV executives' deep ambivalence toward audience ratings. Amid the industry's increasing mandates for "hard knowledge" through concept testing, social research, and Nielsen ratings, TV workers became, paradoxically, ever more attuned to the "*limits* of this knowledge" (pp. 31, 42–43). Less than a decade later, Ang (1991/2006) argued that the TV industry's incessant quest to lure audiences was itself a symbol of the "unknowable" nature of audiences. Consequently, the television institution was "[haunted by] a constant sense of uncertainty" (p. 18).

These and other accounts of legacy media industries make clear that cultural producers' charged relationship with audience measures—and wider systems of quantification—presage the rise of algorithms and Big Data. But the digital media economy's tremendous provisions of data have undoubtedly impacted the creation, circulation, marketing, and monetization of cultural content (Poell et al., in press). As we show in the following section, logics of personalization (i.e., content created for "an audience of one") and ubiquitous algorithmic culture are at the forefront of assessing this impact.

Visibility in Platformized Cultural Production

While contemporary newsrooms have been described as "traffic factories" (Petre, 2015), entertainment-based industries are increasingly reliant on automated systems of demand prediction and evaluation (e.g., Napoli, 2014). Such a robust reliance on quantification can be understood as both a cause and symptom of the so-called platformization of the cultural industries, defined by "the economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms" into these industries along with interrelated shifts in their practices of labor, creativity, and democracy (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell et al., in press). It is against this backdrop that scholars have examined how metric logics are shaping the experiences and output of platformized workers across the news (e.g., Christin, 2018; Petre, 2015), music (Baym, 2018; Hesmondhalgh et al., 2019; Jones, 2020; Morris, 2015), and television (Lotz, 2014) industries. Importantly, the command to pursue quantified indices of visibility is no longer the exclusive province of complex organizations like newsrooms and TV studios. Amid an individualized digital creative economy, metric evaluations are increasingly legible at the *personal* level, most notably through social media platforms. In 2013, Baym (2013) described the rapid uptake of social media by cultural producers as evidence of a "larger shift toward the markers of profitability . . . less tied to production and *more tied to reputation*" (n.p.; see also, Gandini, 2016; Hearn, 2010). She added, "[I]t has also become important to measure audiences in order to *assess social values* such as legitimacy, credibility, likeability and other kinds of status that can presumably (if mysteriously) be converted into economic capital" (italics added, Gandini, 2016; Hearn, 2010).

These quantifiable "assess[ments] of social values" are not just discernible but, rather, instrumental, in platformized creative labor. Here, current and aspiring cultural workers are roused to pursue quantifiable markers of visibility—from likes and favorites to shares, pins, and comments—in earnest (Bishop, 2019; Duguay, 2019; Duffy & Sawey, 2021; Petre et al., 2019; Scolere & Humphreys, 2016). A number of studies in this vein have focused on Instagram influencers and aspirants; scholars have thus described Instagrammers' perceived obligation to engage in "visibility labor" (Abidin, 2018); to play "the visibility game" alongside algorithms and platforms owners (Cotter, 2019); to "optimize their visibility" (O'Meara, 2019); and to adhere to gendered prescriptions of the "visibility mandate" (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Studies of the YouTube community, meanwhile, detail creators' efforts to evade "the threat of invisibility" (Bishop, 2019) while accommodating platform logics configured by "visibility, metrics, and hierarchy" (Glatt, forthcoming; see also, Homant & Sender, 2019).

Collectively, such accounts make clear that visibility is a requirement for career success in cultural industries amid platformization, and that, accordingly, metrics are the central axes on which power and resources are exchanged—in the form of sponsorships, brand deals, collaborations, and so forth. Many of these works, moreover, underscore the role of (perceived) algorithmic systems in configuring creators' level of visibility—often in ways that are lopsided, if not outright biased (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020; Bishop, 2019). Algorithmic systems are dynamic by definition; as such, the nature and extent of their impact seems to change at whim, alongside other forms of the so-called platform evolution (Arriagada & Ibanez, 2020). Such changes often necessitate that content creators "adapt their brand subjectivities and practices across platforms and affordances" (Arriagada & Ibanez, 2020, p. 2). As such, it is critical to assess the impact of visibility across a broad timeframe and, we would add, across the span of creator-centric platforms, given the guiding logic of cross-platform branding (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Glatt, forthcoming; Scolere et al., 2018).

Methods

This project involved in-depth interviews with 30 aspiring or professional platformized creative laborers who create and/or circulate content on Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, and TikTok.[2] Interviews focused on workers' experiences within and across particular platform contexts, including their pursuit of visibility and their understanding of the forces that aided or impeded this pursuit. To recruit participants across platforms, career levels, and content genres, we relied upon three concurrent strategies: (1) directly contacting people who positioned themselves as knowledgeable about social media visibility in creative work; (2) contacting those who publicized their experiences with creative labor on platforms; and (3) utilizing a snowball

of popularity on TikTok: "I think it's just about what people are watching, what they want to see, and what they identify with." He added, "As a creator, that's the hard part: 'What are people going to engage with? What's gonna resonate with them?'" TikTok entertainer Cooper used the language of *lost control* to describe the uncertainty of content visibility on the platform:

> It's hard to predict [what will get attention]. You don't know. So, I'm always like, "Once I post a video, it's out of my hands. I have no control." I'll do everything I can when I'm creating a video to make sure that this is as entertaining as it possibly can be as the content that it is, but beyond that, I have no control.

As a buffer against such uncertainty, creators relied upon metric data from past content as well as analytics provided by the platforms. As aspiring Instagram influencer Eva shared, "I'm starting to learn more about my audience and what they want, and that works better for me too in terms of growing."

Angela, similarly, noted how members of Instagram's creator community tend to invest their energies in content most likely to "go viral"; she clarified, "stuff that is getting just a jillion likes." Angela, who recruits influencers, suggested that certain types of content—such as images that repurpose popular movie quotes—are especially likely to ratchet up metrics, but she also added the following caveat: "that changes over time." Renee, accordingly, noted how she shifted the focus of her Instagram account toward wellness content to tap into what she described as "the big yoga/meditation trend going around the world right now."

Despite creators' reliance on data on audiences and content "trends," such knowledge was deemed ineffectual at especially transitory social moments. Indeed, the volatility of market trends was brought into sharp relief during our final round of interviews, as a number of creators detailed the presumed impact of the pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests. James, for instance, recalled how in response to the Black Lives Matter protests, "[TikTok was] pushing out videos from protests. They were pushing [content from] Black creators." While James lauded the platform's decision to "amplify [marginalized] voices," he acknowledged this was likely a business decision: "Whatever is relevant, and trendy, in that moment, I think that they adjust the algorithm . . . to push that stuff out more." As we discuss in a later section, such algorithmic "adjust[ments]" were a key source of unpredictability.

Other TikTok creators, meanwhile, noted how pandemic-related stay-at-home orders led to an unexpected boost in their metrics. Nickolas, who created content in the tech space, recalled the "influx" of creators on TikTok during the first months of quarantine, saying, "I've seen teachers, doctors, other educators, and other medical professionals on the platform." Consequently, the culture of the platform underwent a marked evolution during this time:

> It used to be an app just for jokes, like people would lip sync to songs, and it would primarily be a dancing app where everyone pretty much would post dancing videos. But I would say right now it's sort of evolved to where you can find a wide variety of content on the app. And I guess more people posting educational content has really helped . . . it has definitely changed throughout the time that I've been on the app.

Despite the unprecedented surge in usage of the platform, Nickolas explained that many brands remained reluctant to invest in advertising. He explained, "some brands are still not considering TikTok as a viable platform to market on." Nolan, who circulates tech and computing content, by contrast, offered a different perspective on advertisers' assessment of the short-form video app:

> [Brands] . . . just saw potential that the younger generation on here has . . . The creators influence them a lot, so they probably saw a lot of potential just on TikTok, just because it's a new platform.

Such comments make clear that the precarities of markets—especially those that impact the visibility of creators—reflect wider external forces, including audiences, advertisers, and the socio-political environment for cultural goods.

Industry Precarity: Ecology of Platforms

At the same time that participants described the instability wrought by ebbing and flowing markets, they also noted the unpredictable nature of the platform ecology. Over a span of mere years, some creator-centric platforms like TikTok and Clubhouse launched or evolved while others (e.g., Vine) seemed to vanish overnight. During our second wave of interviews, Instagrammer Eva noted how the ever-changing nature of individual platforms led to reconfiguration of the wider social media ecology:

> [Constant change is] just something you have to agree to when you start using these things. And accept things are always gonna change, social media changes all the time . . . So, you either just get really angry at Instagram and Facebook changing and stay with the platform, or you leave. And right now, there hasn't been enough of a different platform that has changed up the space to get people to move over there.

Inadvertently, Eva seems to presage the rapid uptick of TikTok; accordingly, several of our interviewees noted how creators had abandoned Instagram's oversaturated community for the short-form video platform. Recall, for instance, the earlier mentioned content from Kavianah, who moved from Instagram to TikTok because—in her words—she was not "being *seen.*" Josie, similarly, noted how many creators saw their visibility decline at the hands of Instagram and subsequently rechanneled their creative energies elsewhere. As she explained during our 2020 interview,

Together, interviewees seemed to suggest that platform changes sparked widespread uncertainty among members of the creator community, even if these features were more transparent and easy to discern than changes to the algorithmic logic.

Opaque Changes in the Algorithmic Systems. In addition to enacting publicly discernible updates to their features, platform companies update their algorithms in earnest, mostly in ways that are not transparent to users and creators. Our interviewees reflected at length on the role of such notoriously "inscrutable" systems in amplifying the uncertainty of their work. While Angela noted how Instagram's algorithm "constantly, constantly changes," Eva explained, "Instagram doesn't really share what goes into making an algorithm. They tweak it whenever they want, and then sometimes they announce it, sometimes they don't . . . People just start noticing that things are happening." To her, such changes were economically motivated: "If they [Instagram] can change the algorithm to help make more money, then they will make that choice."

Given the opaque nature of such changes, many creators cast them as an incessant source of frustration, particularly as they required additional time and energy to "keep up." As Grace noted of Instagram's "constantly changing algorithm": "it's a pain in the ass to keep up with." Then, drawing attention to the labor involved in trying to "game" the algorithm by participating in reciprocal posting groups, Grace told us: "I spend just like a complete hour right after I post . . . liking and commenting on other people's pictures and responding to comments." Cooper offered a similar reflection on TikTok's algorithm:

> Something that's worth noting is the unpredictability of the algorithm on TikTok. It's not always super consistent, and for some reason, you'll go through a week or two where your views are half of what your views are in other weeks. [It happens] even if the production of your content—the quality—isn't changing . . .

Elizabeth summarized, "It seems like nobody really has a firm understanding of how [the algorithm] works or what it means. I think the lack of transparency isn't really good for anyone in that case." Nancy, who had experience creating content for YouTube in the past, even opted to abandon that platform entirely because, in her words, "the algorithms there are seemingly impenetrable."

Some interviewees came to understand the impact of algorithms in the context of perceived punishments, such as when their profile or content was concealed from audiences—making the creator less visible and, correspondingly, less valuable (Bishop, 2019; Caplan & Gillespie, 2020; Petre et al., 2019). Despite the speculation surrounding platform retribution (see, for example, Myers West, 2018), algorithms are widely understood as the initiators of these metric punishments given their perceived role as the technical arbiters

of platforms' community guidelines. As Neve noted, "Pinterest can block a very legit blogger for nothing . . . really for nothing." Yara, meanwhile, described it as "kind of ridiculous that you have to take these super careful, extreme measures to not get punished by Instagram." Being "shadowbanned" by a platform—which users understood to mean that the platform was hiding their content without notification—was a source of angst for many of our participants. As Alex explained of TikTok, "[You might notice that] your followers might go down a bit, and your views aren't as high as they used to be, but you're never specifically *told* 'you've been shadowbanned.'" Josie, who maintained a cross-brand presence while also providing consulting services to aspiring creators, shared, "I've been shadowbanned probably five times in the past year on four different accounts I launched. The algorithm makes mistakes . . . they sometimes will literally ban you for no reason." One site where concerns about shadowbanning circulated was in the context of TikTok's earlier mentioned Creator Fund. After getting accepted into the Fund, Kavianah noted, "It's not as easy for you to show up on people's following pages as it was before, [so] you have to work harder to get on the 'for you' page." Alex, too, suggested that participation in the Fund might make creators less visible: "[There's] definitely a correlation between joining the Creator Fund, and views, and videos, and everything not doing as well." Yet because these shadowbanning decisions are not transparent, some questioned whether it was even a "real" platform practice. As Colt described,

> TikTok is such a random platform. One video will get 5 million views, and the other video will get 200. So, it's easy to say that you're shadowbanned, or TikTok doesn't like you, if all of your videos don't do that well. But I don't think [shadowbanning is] that prevalent, if it even does exist.

Although uncertainty shrouded this practice, most interviewees agreed that with something as nebulous as shadowbanning or other algorithmic punishments, workers have few mechanisms for recourse.

Despite this lack of formal recourse, users still tried to ameliorate uncertainties and mitigate the impact of algorithms on their visibility. Elyse indicated that algorithm changes are to be expected and creators must learn to adapt: "I don't think the algorithm changes can be predicted, nor should they be resisted—in terms of SM [social media] marketing, it's just a case of being super nimble and quick to change." Thus, much like ordinary users who rely upon algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) or "folk theories" (Eslami et al., 2016; DeVito et al., 2017) to make sense of purportedly "black-boxed" algorithmic systems, cultural producers developed and circulated platform-centric algorithmic theories in earnest. To Neve, Pinterest's most recent algorithm change reflected the platform's wish for "content creators to push more fresh content." She explained, "Instead of re-pinning their popular pins, they want us to create almost every

far from "neutral" or "fair." For instance, in their analysis of YouTubers' experiences of demonetization, Caplan and Gillespie (2020) describe how the system of governance is shaped by "different users, different sets of rules, different material resources and opportunities, and different procedural protections when content is demonetized . . . [all of which are] different from the expectations of fairness creators bring to the table" (p. 2). Our findings, too, testify to the profound unevenness in the creator economy's system of "winners" and "losers." To be sure, some creators benefit from this lopsided system of accruing attention, especially when an unexpected boost in visibility generates career windfall. But most creators experience visibility as a source of not just promise, *but also* precarity. Therein lies the rub: for as much as the ideal of *visibility* structures the sprawling creator economy, the systems that enable or constrain it are—paradoxically—*invisible*. The newly formed cottage industry selling "tricks" and "hacks" to game the algorithm (Bishop, 2020; Chan, 2019) highlights the mystery that shrouds the pursuit of visibility. Accordingly, it is important to consider *who* has the time, energy, and financial resources to devote to learning strategies of growth and visibility in hopes of leveraging what Klawitter and Hargittai (2018) describe as "algorithmic literacies" (see also, Cotter, 2019). Put differently, platforms' systems are inscrutable (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016), yes; but perhaps it is more apt to frame them as *more* or *less* scrutable.

In closing, we call for additional insight into the allocations and rewards of visibility in platformized creative labor. While we have focused on those social media sites commonly understood as "mainstream" platforms, recent work on DIY musical artists reveals marked disparities both within and across categories of "consumer-oriented platforms" (e.g., Spotify) and "producer-oriented" platforms (e.g., SoundCloud and Bandcamp) (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2019; Jones, 2020). Meanwhile, the kind of algorithmic punishments we have noted warrant further attention given accounts that they disproportionately impact women, racial/ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQ+ community (Bishop, 2020; Glatt, forthcoming). While only a handful of our interview participants discussed social inequalities—largely in the context of the (in)visibility of Black creators on TikTok—reports in the media show how these rewards and punishments map onto existing structures of marginalization (Frier, 2021; Parham, 2019). For members of these groups, the precarities described above are likely further exacerbated, and we see a focus on their experiences as a key avenue for future research in this space. After all, any nested system of precarities is ultimately embedded within a social structure that is far from stable—or equitable.

ORCID iDs

Brooke Erin Duffy   https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6314-8027

Annika Pinch   https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9628-3428

Megan Sawey   https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2773-0452

Notes

1. Exceptions to this platform-specific tendency include Glatt's forthcoming study of cross-platform labor; Cunningham and Craig's (2019) account of participants in the social media entertainment industry responding to "platform precarity"; and Duguay's (2019) study of laborers on Vine and Instagram.
2. We acknowledge both substantial variation and overlap in the categories "aspiring" and "professional." We use the former to refer to those starting to pursue professional opportunities, and the latter to refer to those who are reliant on platform labor for all or the majority of their income.
3. There are, of course, key limitations of these recruitment mechanisms, including the fact that they privilege those with a degree of fluency and/or expertise in self-promotion and, as an upshot of respondent-driven sampling, increase the homophily in our sample.
4. TikTok's "Creator Marketplace" is open to creators who meet a number of requirements, including having at least 10,000 followers. It provides creators with the opportunity to develop collaborations with brands and monetize their content.
5. In a review of literature, we found that Bakker-Kellogg (2018) uses the term "nested precarities" to describe the wider structures in which academic precariousness is embedded.

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Author Biographies

Brooke Erin Duffy (PhD, University of Pennsylvania) is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at Cornell University. Her interests include social media and society; gender, identity, and inequality; creative work and labor; and platforms and cultural production.

Annika Pinch (BA, Cornell University) is currently pursuing her PhD in the Media, Technology, and Society Department at Northwestern University. Her research interests include digital inequalities; platforms and algorithms; the impact of big data systems; global communication; and how marginalized communities use technology.

Shruti Sannon (PhD, Cornell University) is a post-doctoral researcher in the Department of Information Science at Drexel University's College of Computing and Informatics. Her research interests include privacy, digitally-mediated labor, and power asymmetries in sociotechnical systems, with a focus on the needs and experiences of marginalized groups.

Megan Sawey (BA, Temple University) is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Communication at Cornell University. Her research interests include platformized creative labor; paid companionship practices; and digital feminist resistance.