

Surviving the Algorithm: Digital Labor and Platformized Strategies of Short Video Creators

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Abstract

Short Video platform has formed a new class of cultural producers who work under conditions influenced more by algorithms rather than their employers' will, contract terms and actual control capabilities. Based on the theoretical framework of platform capitalism, digital labour theory and algorithmic power, this paper uses publicly accessible DataReportal data and academic studies over a period of 20 years to examine the Digital labour of short-video creators. Three interrelated arguments will be presented as follows: first, short-video creation is one form of digital labour whose exploitative aspects are concealed behind the discourse on creative entrepreneurship; second, Algorithmic visible Mechanisms generate systemic Conditions of precarity that creators must constantly manage; Third, The survival strategies which Creators have been cultivating in reaction - Content optimisation, Self-quantityization, Emotion Labor, and Platform Diversification - bear Costs that the celebratory rhetoric of the creator economy never mentions. Based on this, it can be seen that some problems have emerged in the current management structure of Taobao Live shows.

Keywords

Digital labor; platform capitalism; algorithmic power; short video creators; creator economy; platformization; visibility politics.

1. Introduction

According to DataReportal in its 2023 report, there are about four-point-nine billion social media users worldwide, with each user averaging a total usage time of two-and-a-half-and-a-quarter hours daily [1]. There has been an increasing amount of time being used for viewing short videos created not by media enterprises, but by independent creators who organise their work life based on a single governing risk: whether the algorithm will present their works to others. This kind of uncertainty does not originate from a specific experience of the short video creator, but rather arises within this context; therefore, when making various choices regarding content creation timing, presentation styles, continuation intentions, etc., these actions exhibit their particularity and are rarely recognized labour.

The creators' economy has been repeatedly referred to as an "opportunity," "autonomy" and "entrepreneurial self-determination". It conceals that there exists a significant structural connection among individual creators and the platforms where they work; In fact, it is one of extreme imbalance in power, information deprivation and setting terms for cooperation independently. They have the essential technological support; control their own algorithm settings and rules; Obtain a large share of profits in creator's labour-generated contents. The creators provide the content to build a large audience; both sides are bearing some risk without negotiation of rights issues.

Through the analytical framework of platform studies and digital labour theories in recent years, this paper explores how they relate to this issue. The main idea is that short video

creation is a type of digital labour with its exploitative elements hidden behind the language of creative freedom and entrepreneurial opportunities provided by platforms, media outlets, and many creators themselves when describing it. Understandable for users in daily life, it is necessary to give them a way out from this virtual reality by using theory; only then can their lives be freed from the limitations imposed on them within such an environment.

This paper is divided into five parts, building a theoretical foundation to analyse the phenomenon of short-video creation as digital labour; Examining how algorithms shape creators' working life; Analyse Creators' response to survival Strategies; Consider What these Findings Mean for Platform Governance and Digital Labour Politics More Broadly.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Digital labour has a lineage outside of the platform economy, but it is only applicable to this background. Terranova's basic research on free labour in the context of internet culture provided the theoretical basis for subsequent studies to argue that the enthusiasm, voluntariness, and sometimes pleasure of participation in online cultural activities is both truly free and an instance of labour producing benefits for others without corresponding remuneration [2]. There is a clear contradiction that work can be freely chosen but remains exploitative; this phenomenon becomes both theoretically intriguing and politically complicated. People who make videos for pleasure do not escape from the structure of what determines the mobilisation mechanism and beneficiaries' interest of such activities.

Based on the existing research materials, Fuchs expanded the original digital labour theory and proposed that there is a unique way for social media companies to make money: extract value through activities of users; There is no form of compensation as neither resources have been used nor produced. Through capturing the advertisement income brought about by the attention of its members, it creates a balance where both parties do not clearly understand that one side provides value but does not bear costs[3]. As a result, among new short-video creators in recent years, there is an increasing tendency towards active creation of high-value business content aimed at platform development rather than self-generation of passive promotional data.

Duffy's exploration of Aspirational Labour discovered that something essential is embedded beneath the framework; By recording how, under the illusion of creative fulfillment and anticipation for a glorious future, creators voluntarily dedicate more energy to working on platform systems despite not reaping what they sow [4]. Aspiration to create an audience and make money from work one loves has a ideological function of normalising the conditions for unpaid labour or underpaid labour, which would seem exploitative in other fields.

Srnicek's analysis of platform capitalism provides the systemic background for understanding these individual cases to some extent [5]. Platforms are not neutral infrastructures; they are a particular kind of capital organisation based on the extraction of data, networks creating winner-take-all competition, and a strategically placed position as intermediaries for cultural production between producers and users. In such an organisational form, Platforms have defined the terms; modified Rules; enjoy benefits with little or no cost since they are not responsible for generating Value in the first place.

Van Dijk and other researchers have examined the emergence of the platform society; they argue that, in addition to transforming economic activities, the creation process of culture under a platform system also follows similar laws. It is now driven more by algorithms than aesthetics and communication standards [6]. According to Bucherer's analysis of algorithmic power, there is a more precise explanation for how this adjustment happens; Algorithms govern visibility by means that are intentionally obfuscatory, susceptible to changes with no advance warning, and designed to maximise Platform engagement over creators' wellbeing [7].

3. The Algorithmic Condition

As a short-video creator, one works in an environment of structured uncertainty; that is to say, there will be some systems you are not able to see. There are no publicly announced rules for determining when a certain piece of content has reached ten views or one billion; it remains unstable. Changes without notice; Responds to factors hidden behind the scenes; Follows an optimisation target different from that of creators - such as increasing interactions and time spent on platforms, advertising revenue generation which have little connection with these goals, but seem quite close during good periods.

According to DataReporter's data from 2023, TikTok had an approximately 1.092 billion monthly active user base; therefore, it has relatively good coverage through the algorithm and is fiercely contested in terms of being noticed by the algorithm among its creator community [1]. The platform's recommended function that distributes content to non-following users of the creator is considered to be the primary reason why new creators can quickly attract more attention and why established ones may become less visible because their popularity or relevance changes in this context. Recommender system was used to replace it, resulting in an entirely new mode of online information release model compared with the former one; The creator's ability to directly communicate with the public and set up personal contact platforms due to platform rules has disappeared.

The psychological consequences of this kind of structure have gradually attracted more attention from journalists and scholars. Algorithmic anxiety, which refers to a long-term uncertainty in the arts community about whether one's work will gain widespread dissemination on the internet and retain recognisability if content changes or posting habits are adjusted. It cannot be said to have a false sense of reality; because the creator's dependence on such an opaque system, who has no right or duty to explain substantial alterations in benefit matters. Managing this kind of anxiety is full of labor: tracking indexes, viewing platform warnings; experimenting with posting techniques; Joining a creator community and learning algorithm application; It is necessary but rarely paid attention to.

4. Platformized Survival Strategies

Short-video makers' Strategies for survival under the Algorithmic Condition are not haphazard adjustments but rather structured Responses to specific Features of Platform Power. The research literature and creators' practices have all presented four primary categorisations.

Optimisation Strategies for Content include the planned adaptation of creative choices to perceived Algorithmic Preferences. Creators learn which formats, lengths, topics, sounds, and visual styles the algorithm currently favors and adjust their production accordingly, sometimes at considerable cost to their own aesthetic instincts. The opening hook for videos in just three seconds; the application of trending sounds and tags; Post algorithms at optimised time - these tactics are tactical responses to conflicting interests between themselves and creators' values under incentives. Cunningham and Craig's study on the idea of social-media entertainment reveals that pressure from optimisation forms one part among many in a cultural reason for independent-creator cultures spread across different media formats. According to Bucherer's accounts of the if-then logic of algorithms, there are several reasons why the phenomenon of alignment pressure is ubiquitous; those creators whose contents cannot align with the preference set by algorithms will lose visibility as an indispensable condition for any form of success - that is to say, they become professionally non-existent.

Self-quantification approaches track performance indicators continuously to serve as a reference for making contents. Views, completion Rates, shares, Comments and engagement rate became the primary bases for recognising the value of works and guidance by creators.

Andrejevic's research on the work of being watched can provide an overall explanation for this state; In particular, Users' tendency to generate and disseminate information about themselves as consumers is one way that Platforms produce Value. Self-quantification becomes a means for creators to survive and discipline themselves in order to organise their creative subjects according to metrics; thus, becoming producers as well as products produced by platforms based on such quantitative data.

Emotional labour Strategies refer to cultivating parasocial relationships with audiences for purposes such as engaging and retaining audience members. Creators are very kind-hearted in responding to people's comments and expressing gratitude for their followers' continuous support through genuine communication; Therefore, maintain existing loyalty among fans after algorithmic adjustments. Duffy's study of Aspirational Labour highlights how this emotional commitment, while sincere, is also deliberate - care for the audience as an answer to platform ecology that rewards interaction [4]. There are numerous aspects to the labour required for maintaining these relationships, as well as the constant-quality maintenance needed by community management; moreover, there are emotional needs related to public self-disclosure in the process of constructing one's identity.

Platform Diversified Strategy: Spread creative expression among various platforms to avoid dependency on a single Algorithm-based platform. The creators building audience across TikTok, YouTube and Instagram manage risks by ensuring they do not lose all of it due to algorithm changes at any single platform. According to Bishop's study of influencer management tools, there is evidence showing that the algorithms controlling creators' visibility have been intentionally influenced by brand safety logic and bias structures that users cannot verify or dispute; thus, it adds another degree of obscurity. [10] Based on Van Dijk et al.'s definition of the platform ecosystem, two reasons lead to an audience's concentration at some platforms; As this kind of distribution will result in an increase in labor costs due to a wider range is difficult for individuals to have more time spent working actually producing content.

What they have in common is that there are progressive losses to creativity autonomy and normalisation of self-utilization for the sake of participation in platform economy. Based on Srennice's theory of Platform Capitalism to explain this structure: The platform acquires economic value from creator labour, and bears the risk and cost of production itself, which is contrary to conventional understanding.

5. Discussion

Based on these analyses, there are many problems with the picture of short-video creators' work in the creator economy discourse usually presented. Creators do not operate as cultural entrepreneurs freely within an attention market; instead, they bear the labour conditions imposed by platform systems over which they have no control, including content creation, data organization, emotional investment, and risk assessment among others that remain unacknowledged either in quantity or reward.

Digital labour, platform capitalism and algorithmic power all present a more sufficient explanation for this scenario compared with the entrepreneurship theory dominant in both public opinion and policies. Terranova's free labour idea, Fuchs' social media exploitation analysis and Duffy's aspirational labour research all show that why creator exploitation is so hard to identify is organised by real passion and voluntary involvement which makes the structural problems difficult to notice. [2][3][4] Cunningham and Craig's analysis of social media entertainment also shows that the celebratory framing of platform creative culture always suppresses the power asymmetry issues, thereby maintaining the ideology work driving creators to remain loyal to systems benefiting only the platforms. Bucher's Algorithmic power framework also adds a crucial element: The obfuscation of algorithms, that is, individuals are

unable to individually comprehend when and under what conditions this system will function [7].

And also possess policy orientation. The existing labour laws have deficiencies in addressing platforms' creators; although they hold a form of contractor's position and hence fall outside employment protection under normal circumstances, their actual dependence on platform infrastructures has rendered such status highly fictitious. Based on Andrejevic's research, at present, the economic benefits brought about by creator behaviour have yet to be monetised; they exist in a public domain of creative labour and face weak governance attention issues. Bishop discovered an algorithmic bias problem with influencer management tools, which leads to creators in disadvantageous positions being treated less harshly by the system based on systemic algorithms not considering their needs; However, there is currently no identification or remedy mechanism for such problems within the current regulation. That is to say, it should have some kind of management way that acknowledges these structural properties but cannot shut out its real creative power brought about by the platform construction.

6. Conclusion

The short video creators are workers, and the platforms that these workers operate belong to organised systems created by them for exploiting labour resources under as little obligation as possible towards generating content on those platforms. It is no longer a debate over whether there are defects in short-video creation; rather, it is more important to clarify one's understanding of the extent to which such problems occur on the platform itself; And also who benefits most from this organizational structure at present.

Creators' survival Strategies - optimising for Algorithms, evaluating their Performance emotionally Labour for audience diversify Platforms - Are rational Adaptations of Structure Conditions that They Neither Natural Nor Inevitable. Given this recognition would be necessary as the basis for creating theoretical frameworks, regulatory measures and collective-organising approaches designed to create more just circumstances under which many people in society live by working with algorithms may finally come about.

Future applications should include: combining multiple years and long periods of observation with creators' work lives, as well as cross-platform comparisons under various cultural backgrounds in global regulatory mechanisms over platform employment relations; Based on this, new systems that provide strong support for policy formulation will need to be established accordingly.

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