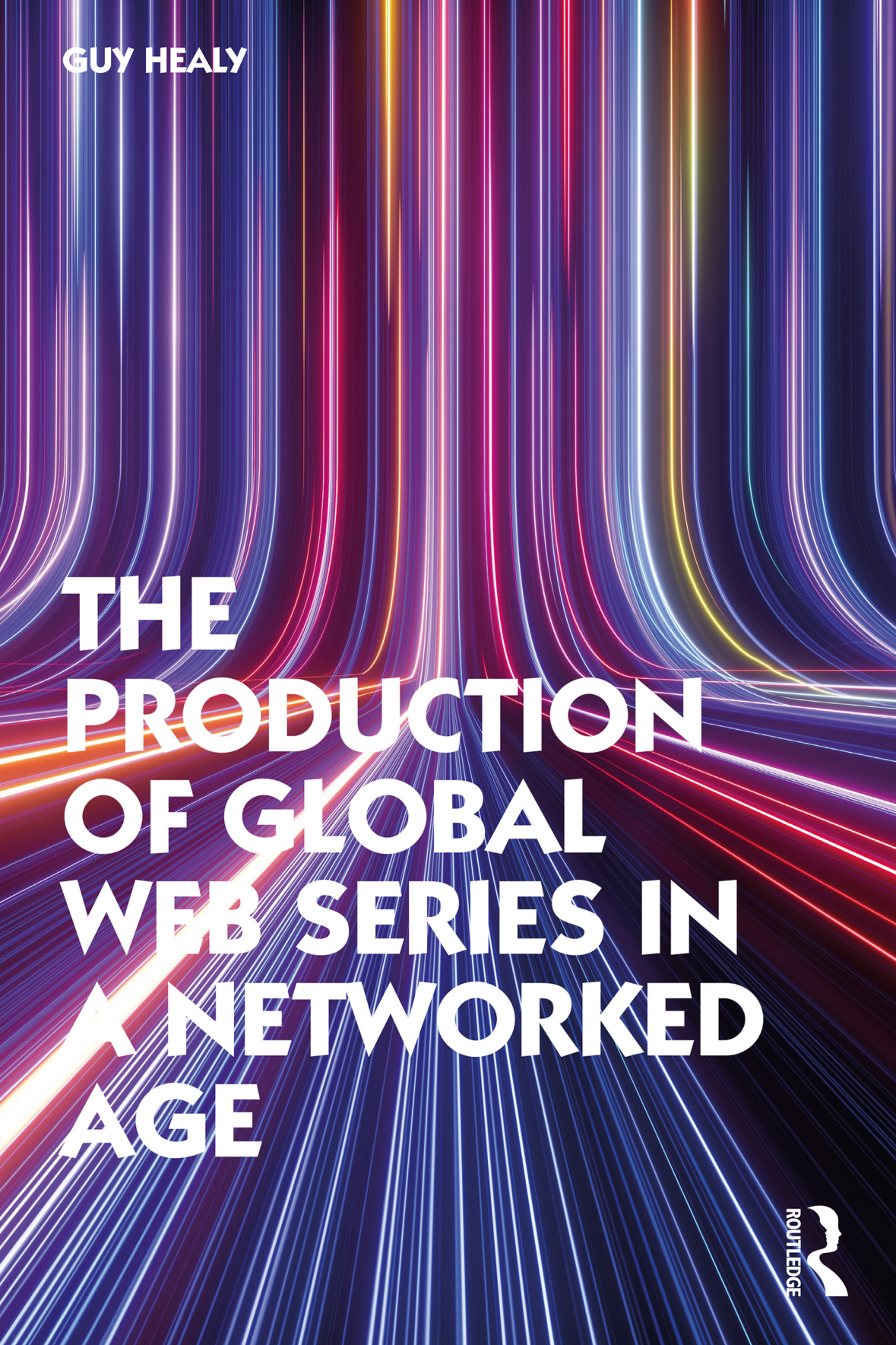
GUY HEALY
THE PRODUCTION OF GLOBAL WEB SERIES IN A NETWORKED AGE
ROUTLEDGE

THE PRODUCTION OF GLOBAL WEB SERIES IN A NETWORKED AGE

This book tells the story of diverse online creators – women, ethnic and racial minorities, queer folk and those from hardscrabble backgrounds – producing low budget, high cultural impact web series which have disrupted longstanding white male domination of the film and TV industries.

Author Guy Healy addresses four burning problems faced by creators in the context of digital disruption (along with potential solutions), namely: the sustainability of monetizing digital content and the rising possibility of middle-class artistic careers; algorithmic volatility; the difficulty of finding people to share jealously guarded industry knowledge as traditional craft-based mentoring and expertise-sharing mechanisms break down; and the lack of diversity and authenticity in high-profile storytelling. It includes nine case studies, five drawn from a second wave of outstanding YouTube-developed talent, transitioning to longer form narrative, most collaborating with established TV producers working across the divide between online and established television culture, and all from under-represented and/or minority backgrounds. The balance are film-school and industry professionals leveraging YouTube in the same way, including two Writers Guild of America new media award-winners. These storytellers leverage their social networks and chase sustainable careers by reaching audiences of subscription video-on-demand platforms and mainstream online broadcast in Australia and North America. *The Production of Global Web Series in a Networked Age* is the first longitudinal study of this historic rapprochement between online and television cultures. Four of the cases are in Emmy-winning contexts, and one in an Emmy nominated context.

Covering 2005–2021, the book reveals distinctive new forms of screen industry convergence with profound implications for creators' careers, the screen industry in general, new media theory, and broader cultural and social change.

It is essential reading for students, academics and industry professionals working on the production and distribution of web series.

Dr Guy Healy works as a researcher on an Australian Research Council project investigating the role of the web series globally. Healy worked for about a decade at *The Australian* newspaper, mainly as a higher education writer; and for BBC Wildlife magazine as a freelance correspondent investigating species-level threats to wildlife. His most important story reported on calls from zoologists warning that research funding into, and surveillance of bat-borne viruses in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere, had to be prioritized, in 2009.

THE PRODUCTION OF GLOBAL WEB SERIES IN A NETWORKED AGE

Guy Healy

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PREFACE

Every art form starts with the physical tools with which to create that particular art form. Without these tools, the artist is nothing more than a person filled with creative ideas unable to communicate them to the world. But once the artist has their tools, the inner world that they spend their time living in meets with reality and the perception of others.

My tool from an early age was a pencil I used to write simple stories, and later into my teens, movies became my outlet of escape. But it wasn't until my 20s that I, as a young woman, left the Ohio multiplex, discovered cinema, and fell in love with the idea of writing and directing film. Film was my path; it was all I wanted to do. I thought it was all I would ever do. I had no idea what new technology was coming nearly a decade later that would change everything for me as an artist and give me new tools to make my mark.

I have always considered myself lucky to be a creator at this time in our creative human history. I was given the opportunity to work in a new art form that no one had before me. It was short form episodic storytelling displayed on computer. I jumped onto the scene in 2008 when there were no rules, only good storytelling and technological restrictions. And those restrictions or obstructions only fuelled the creativity while forcing us to stretch our imaginations past the forms that seemed etched in stone by film or television. It was as exciting to be a web series creator as it was a struggle. I am an unabashed advocate for web series. Web series changed my life as a storyteller and gave me a chance to tell stories that would likely never have been told. Healy's examination of web series seeks and succeeds to explain why so many of us have taken to this new way to tell stories. But more than that, it validates an art form that from day one has had to explain and defend itself.

The web series is truly a product of technology. The evolution of web series runs parallel to that of technology. Once restricted by running time and

attention spans, the web series has moved past its restrictions because technology has moved past its restrictions – from micro series found on social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and the like, to large Hollywood offerings on Netflix, Amazon, and their ever-growing competition. What we see today in digital/streaming entertainment can all trace their roots back to web series. Now is a perfect moment for Healy's examination of the form, its evolution, and its potential sustainability for the independent creator.

The journey towards independent storytelling on the web, in part, started with the unions in Hollywood trying to figure out how to police the work created there. Hollywood was no longer the gatekeeper of episodic storytelling. Hollywood moved quickly to close up ranks, but the in-fighting with unions gave time to independent creators and sometimes frustrated Hollywood creators to tell often rejected stories. And in the process, creators could build audiences of their own. Hollywood veterans no longer had to struggle through endless pitch meetings and long development processes. For the first time since the studio system was formed nearly a century prior, creators had the ability to distribute directly to their audience around the world, for free. And what did that mean? Everything. One specific benefit was that many of the voices and audiences that had been overlooked or frankly ignored were now being heard, proving their eagerness to support stories told by them and for them. Chris McCaleb, Emmy nominated editor with roots in web series, put it best when interviewed for the International Academy of Web TV Awards when honouring the industry's pioneers: 'When you remove the wall between yourself and the audience, you can do almost anything'. A web series, especially those made independently, is at its best and most successful when it serves a niche audience. Which again, made the web a much-needed home for all those 'misfits' who struggled to get stories financed with characters that were of a minority group.

A wave of independent web series creators pioneered the space from the mid-2000s and the decade that followed. There had been web series prior to then that carved a path, but the first wave that I was also a part of, really set the pace forward. Not only was there a sudden surge of series being made, there was also a comradery in the space amongst all creators. We were all learning and sharing information about the latest technological breakthroughs. Together we went from standard definition to HD, to cameras with unremarkable fixed lenses to cameras that allowed us to use top notch interchangeable lenses. We went through the rise of the DSLR, which made the web series even more affordable. We also travelled the changes of video players, from the need to use early video players for a price, such as Brightcove, on our websites, to the ability to embed players from other sites such as blip.tv and YouTube for free, cutting our costs down even further. With every technological breakthrough, another creator was able to push the form of web series even further.

The evolution of the web series also coincides with the launch of social media. Strong and dedicated use of social media is one of the biggest reasons for the success of a web series. The boom of web series exists because of the access to the

loyal fans that support them, and most often than not, fans find shows through social media. Not only did creators have access to distribution but they also had access to marketing, again for free.

Once Hollywood squared away its union contracts for the web it was time for them to jump hard into the game. But even before Hollywood moved with full force, brands were pushing out scripted and unscripted content at a good clip. Microsoft was one of the first to see promise in the medium when they put money behind Felicia Day's megahit *The Guild*. American Express endowed Hollywood veteran and early web adopter John Avnet with enough funds to create WIGS, a YouTube channel with stories with women in the lead and starring Hollywood actors. There were also smaller brands like Spherion that backed *The Temp Life* from producer Wilson Cleveland, one of the web's biggest connectors of web series talent and brands. I worked with Cleveland on a series called *Bestsellers* with my *Anyone But Me* partner Susan Miller (see chapter 10).[1] The brand SFN Group couldn't have been easier to work with and at the time we had a bigger budget than we had on our own series.

Brands found the web an appealing way to reach potential customers at a fraction of what ads or television commercials were costing them. Brands such as 7-Eleven teamed up with web series platforms like blip.tv (which was later bought by Maker which was later bought by Disney and neither exist today) who tapped indie creators to do what they have been doing so successfully on their own, getting views and views by the millions. The partnership between web series creators and brands served both their needs perfectly. Brands cared only about getting as many views as possible and creators cared even more about getting funding to create content. Creators jumped at the chance to get in the good graces of brands and many of the early pioneers, such as creator Yuri Baranovsky, started to find their niche in branded entertainment. The budgets for many early branded series were considerably low by Hollywood standards, some even getting an hour worth of content for $50,000. The word on the street in the early years was that web series didn't have to look good. Many series that were getting an audience and bringing in views had minuscule budgets to create their series. Because their budgets were barely in the thousands due to self-funding many creators cut corners on talent for key positions. Instead, many adopted the model of grab a camera and go, ignoring even the basic fundamentals of filmmaking and creating series that often looked more amateurish than artistic. Because of that, no brand needed to spend a lot of money. That kind of thinking created an early dismissive stigma against web series here in the United States of America and it has taken the better part of a decade to lose that reputation.

Some of Hollywood's earlier adapters such as former Disney head Michael Eisner and his studio Vuguru and Sony's platform Crackle took a shot on independent creators, handing them the reins to modest budgets to create content. And soon the rest of Hollywood caught on and even agents to the stars no longer thought of web series as that pesky kid that just makes cute little cat videos.

Much like the independent film movement of the early 1990s, web series was about to travel the same path. Just like the independent film movement, new voices were being heard and reaching an audience. But just as Hollywood created 'indie' film studios in 1990s, closing the door on the movement, it seemed web series could suffer the same fate. But unlike indie film, indie web series still has the advantage of creating content and immediately reaching an audience without a middleman. So the potential to thrive without gatekeepers is still possible, although there are still great disadvantages when it comes to budget.

During the years, I have spent a great deal of time travelling to speak on panels all over the world and have also taught producing web series for a couple of institutions and the number one question asked is, how do you make money? My answer has always been, if you are getting into web series for the money, get out now. Today, there are additional avenues for creators to bring in revenue, thanks again to the evolution of technology. Because there are so many digital channels looking for content, there are opportunities. But the problem still lies in the running time of web series. In order to get digital distribution on most channels you need at least 50 hours of content, a very hard reach for web series but when paired with other series the hour restriction seems possible to overcome and so revenue beyond ad-rev share is possible. And with more channels discovering the niche audience is the way to success, the web series could see better monetization days ahead.

Even with a potential of better revenue ahead, web series have never been about the money, it's always been about artistic freedom and never having to ask permission. In the pages that follow, I think you will find that Healy balances the business of storytelling with the passion of the creator to tell stories, no matter the budget or obstructions. Not all creators have travelled the same path – our countries of origin have given each of us different advantages and obstacles – but we all share the same desire to push forward our voices and for someone like Healy to examine and celebrate them.

Tina Cesa Ward

Note

1 For their scripted web drama, *Anyone But Me* (2008–2012; 2019), Miller and Ward won the Writers Guild of America inaugural Award for Original New Media, 2011. *ABM* has attracted about 100 million views to 2020, being one of the few indie web series to platform to the Hollywood studios', Hulu, via a license deal.

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1

INTRODUCTION

> The history of the field [of cultural production] arises from the struggle between the established figures and the young challengers…it results from the struggle between those who have made their mark (*fait date* – 'made an epoch') and who are fighting to persist, and those who cannot make their own mark without pushing into the past those who have an interest in stopping the clock, eternalizing the present stage of things.
>
> Pierre Bourdieu (2005), *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature*

Storytelling in algorithmic culture

One of the biggest mysteries in the arts are the Muses, the wellsprings of creativity and originality storytellers have drawn upon across the ages to entertain, edify, inspire, and console. During the Renaissance, historian Giorgio Vasari explained creativity as 'divinely inspired', while acknowledging 'an element of savagery and madness' in the artists he knew (Bull, 1987, p. 67). During the 1800s, creative inspiration was reconceptualized from 'historical, dead and mythological muses such as Sappho or the Virgin Mary', to the 'living contemporaries' of poets, especially lovers, says Sarah Parker (2015). Updating our understanding of creativity during the modern era, Larry Briskman (1980) refers to creativity as the defining human drive, where 'mysterious and miraculous' psychological processes occur within the mind of the individual artist. More recently, creative industries advocate, John Howkins, has focused on the importance to jobs and wealth generation of the individual creative entrepreneur who draws upon 'the wealth that lies within themselves' (Ghelfi, 2005, p. 6). By contrast, present-day approaches emphasize the inherently social nature of the creative impulse driven by *frisson*, as talented people brainstorm with

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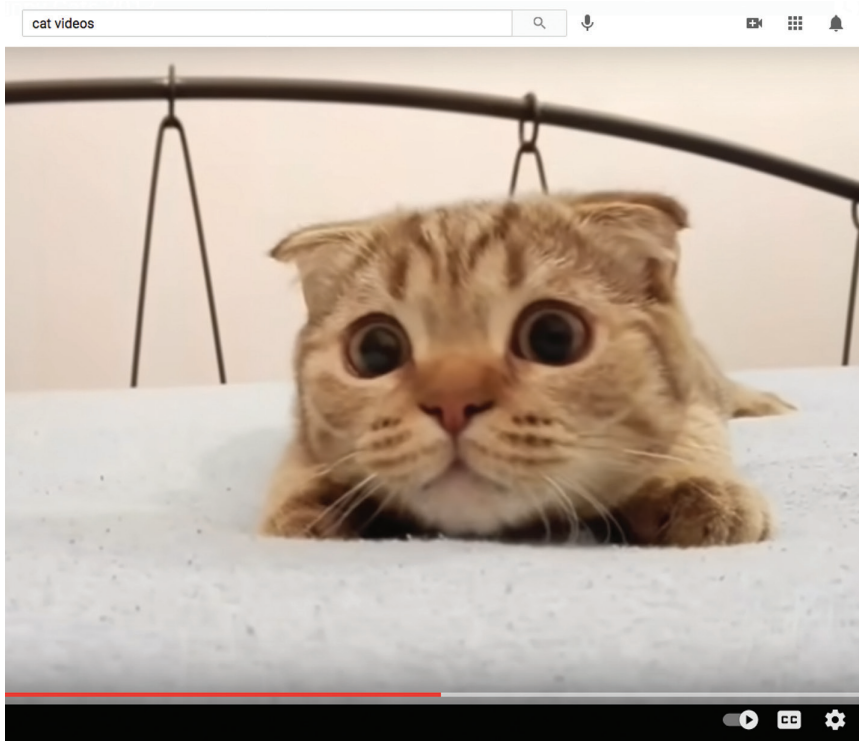

FIGURE 1.1 Content clash: Everyday content posed a challenge to pioneering web-series makers.

each together, say scholars of creativity, Paisley Livingston (2009, p. 12) and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014, p. 51). This book tells the stories of how today's most influential storytellers on the small screens are finding their Muses in the unlikeliest of places: the now ubiquitous social network of YouTube. YouTube is the world's second most popular search engine, after parent Google (Allgaier, 2020) – the basis of its appeal as a discovery platform for creators and producers. By 2007, YouTube's impact on youth pop culture was so profound that TV writers were ordered 'to make things more YouTube-able' (Banks, 2010a, p. 22), so broadcast TV could attempt to retain younger generations. Just as matter is understood to curve space-time, the US$8 billion YouTube says it distributes to creators from its US$15 billion annual advertising haul (Kafka, 2020), can curve the creative process among those doing good and the commercially ruthless alike. Via high-level access to nine outstanding creative teams, I investigate what this proto-industry means for the livelihoods of web-series makers, whose stories are told, how they are told, how fan communities are mobilized to help sustain them online, and what this means for cultural progress. Above all, by bending algorithmic culture to serve their needs, these storytellers solved the notorious problem of interference in scripts by powerful Hollywood film and

TV executives, and held fast to their creative visions. They are not making family shows for prime-time TV. These Gen Xs, Millennials, Gen Ys, and Gen Zs have long moved the zeitgeist on.

Ultimately, this book is about what happens when the young challengers and established figures put aside their differences and collaborate to best adapt to the post-TV-broadcast era that Cunningham and Craig (2019, p. 14) characterize as 'frictionless'. Such has been the growth of all forms of series outside 'TV' (broadcasters), some influential European policymakers no longer use the term 'TV series' since it is 'too restrictive' (Baujard et al., 2019, p. 34). Covering the period 2005–2021, this book reveals distinctive new forms of screen industry convergence with deep implications for the careers of creators, the screen industry itself, and more equitable social change. It is the first longitudinal study of veteran YouTubers and established TV producers making highly popular serial narrative web-series together, and it maps the professional outcomes from their rapprochement in cases 1–5. Cases 6–9 map the reverse of the coin – outcomes for film school graduates and established professionals. Long smarting from its reputation as a giant 'cat video' archive, YouTube has struggled to raise the professionalism of the creators it hosts. The platform spent US$100 million on its Original Channels initiative in 2011, has built state of the art studios – the YouTube Spaces – in seven capital cities worldwide, now largely shuttered due to the pandemic, and hosts an online Creator Academy. One largely unexamined YouTube professionalization initiative though is Skip Ahead, a hybrid collaboration between the old school of Screen Australia – which invested in independent Australian films such as *The Babadook, Red Dog, The Sapphires,* and *The Dressmaker* – and the platform the cultural establishment loves to hate, Google's YouTube. Under Skip Ahead, grant winning YouTubers were encouraged to collaborate with established TV producers to make low-budget web-series, a hybrid format usually comprising serial videos that tell a bigger story, for YouTube first release. The globally rare initiative was conceived by Kristen Bowen, now Head of Global Activation – FameBit at YouTube's San Bruno, California headquarters; Mike Cowap, a former UK Film Council Shorts coordinator; and Felicity McVay, former Head of Content Partnerships for YouTube, Australia/New Zealand. In his roles, Cowap financed and managed four Emmy-winning and one Oscar-winning project. Skip Ahead represents a natural experiment in how creativity and storytelling-based careers are adapting, or failing to adapt, at best practice level, to digital disruption in our 'platform society' (Van Dijck & Poell, 2015, p. 1).

This book is for those seeking the lessons from the creative journeys and struggles of the veteran YouTubers, established TV producers, and film & TV school graduates whose trajectories I track. Here I show, for the first time in detail, how they rejected the traditional routes to a screen career as no longer fit for purpose, and whose narratives are exhausted culturally, to leverage YouTube. Edgy web-series and high YouTube views were leveraged to break into where contemporary screen storytelling is often most authentic, progressive, and diverse: broadcast video-on-demand (BVOD) and subscription video-on-demand

(SVOD) services in Australia and North America (Healy, 2019, p. 116). Indeed, the first lesson was the tendency for more Skip Ahead creators to pursue longer formats off YouTube where they started – particularly among these hybrid VOD services – the longer they are exposed to algorithmic volatility on the endemically short-form YouTube. Where these exceptional web-series were created, they acted as an adaptive genre able to show craft and storytelling skills sufficient to secure license deals with BVODs and SVODs, and thus effect a transition to sustainable creative labour. This investigation has lessons globally for how new and old media can come together for contemporary storytelling.

Cunningham and Craig (2019, p. 200) argue social media entertainers (SME), YouTubers, are engaged in subcultural appropriation from the margins to the mainstream: '(SME) creators are like the punk musicians, if they owned their clubs and released their music on their own record labels'. Similarly, Robert Kyncl, YouTube's chief business officer, describes YouTube's mostly shortform personalities and performers as 'streampunks'. The nine cases in this book reveal the world of the streampunk storytellers, their career trajectories, and the strategies and choices they made to produce, in most cases, shortform episodic web-series with views ranging from the millions to the scores of millions, up to 170 million (*Starting from Now*, Chapter 7). These 'streampunk' storytellers – some of whom started as big personalities and performers – have stolen a march on legions of their peers. But their lessons were hard-won: they shed blood, sweat, and tears on their journeys in pursuit of their creative visions. Many waited years for traditional TV gatekeepers to greenlight their productions in the hope of breaking into a TV industry they rejected anyway as not speaking to their cultural identities in authentic ways. Many – such as Taylor Litton-Strain and Erin Good, and Tina Cesa Ward – first made numerous short films, before turning to the exceptional web-series to supersede their peers, and fulfil their passion projects among the BVODs and SVODs that exemplify post-broadcast TV. In just the space of a decade, the web-series has been reframed from professionally damaging to highly desirable, 'almost hot', Tina Cesa Ward, chair of the International Academy of WebTV (IAWTV) and co-creator, *Anyone But Me* (2008–2012; 2019) (100 million views), told me (Ward, 2019). Single episodes of web-series featured in the cases, for example, Julie Kalceff's (*Starting from Now*; 2014–2016) (pictured 1.2), and Ward's *Anyone But Me*, have each alone attracted almost 40 million and 20 million views, respectively[1]. These makers are cultural forces to be reckoned with.

For 100 years creative professionals have wanted to create and own their own IP, but have fallen short (Christian, 2018, p. 157). Unlike those still using short films few ever see, or making 'calling card' scripts that are usually never made (Ashton, 2011, p. 49), or pilots never seen again unless they air (Banks, 2010a, p. 31), or are unpaid (Baujard et al., 2019, p. 71), the teams in these nine cases discovered the web-series to be a hard and fast career shortcut, and intellectual property (IP) generator. Crucially however, equitable IP share still remains contested. The evidence from these cases also shows significant career acceleration

FIGURE 1.2 Marginalized storytellers prove a hit on YouTube: Sarah de Possesse and Rosie Lourde[3] in Starting from Now (SFN) (170 million views) (Chapter 7). This episode alone was viewed almost 40 million times by 2021.

by effective use of multiple social networks, or multiplatform labour for their storytelling (Healy, 2019), on average shaving four years from the usual decade or more to 'break in'. To build sustainable careers, these creators and writer-producers collectively published 1,257 videos to first attract the 'deep niche' attention of 2.35 billion views among themselves on YouTube alone. Then, being in an Australia concerned to protect its own culture, they won modest grants of up to AU$100,000 such as through Google/Screen Australia's Skip Ahead, provided they had 50,000 followers and could pitch a killer narrative to Screen Australia investment managers. This lean and mean subvention meant they could access a combination of Obi Wan-style narrative mentors and the sort of competitive grant scheme that fired up the early Renaissance[2].

Information disorder has made trustworthy storytelling more important than ever. My investigation centres on the unprecedented opportunities represented by YouTube for creative labour beyond what Tarleton Gillespie (2010, p. 358) describes as 'the tidal wave' of shortform user-generated content. I do not condone the dark side unleashed by participation, and advocate algorithm reform to enhance the new capacities of online storytellers to do more of the good creative work they love. The Internet was originally promised to users as 'an Athens without the slaves' and 'an age as golden as that of Greece' (Robins & Webster, 1988, p. 8). I am no such Pollyanna. After five years investigating content on YouTube, my experience instead reflects the observation of Microsoft researcher, danah boyd: 'the internet mirrors and magnifies the good *and* the bad *and* the ugly' (Turner, 2012, p. 180). For example, the performance of dangerous

media 'idiocy' (Goriunova, 2012, p. 223), such as Tide Pod challenges, egregious user-generated-content (UGC) videos claiming mass shootings in the United States are staged by 'crisis actors' (Ortutay, 2018), Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube amplifying and 'platforming' racism and hate speech (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017, p. 930), and 'information disorder' generally (Krafft & Donovan, 2020, p. 195). Amazon, Facebook, Google and YouTube have also faced regulatory action over their power asymmetry (Culpepper & Thelen, 2020, p. 293), manifested in their alleged 'take it or leave it' approach to negotiations with smaller businesses. Platforms have addressed these public interests with varying degrees of effectiveness, usually via resistance to state regulation (Culpepper & Thelen, 2020, p. 288). Importantly, Newcomb and Alley (1983, p. 23), who interviewed US TV producers of the 1970s Golden era of TV, argue the best fictional TV storytelling has a special 'liminal' or reflexive quality that promotes the sorts of imagination and cognition in participants necessary for 'cultural survival', and even renewal. Addressing the dark side of participation is beyond the scope of this book except in one crucial way: that the rich participatory online communities brought into being by these diverse serial narratives, offer hope of a sorely needed, renewed public sphere to help push back the dark. Skip Ahead mentor, and Emmy-nominated script editor Mike Jones, suggests episodic storytelling – by virtue of the gaps they open up in the narrative – allow for immersion and 'cognitive processing'.[4] As JS Mill reminds us in *On Liberty* (1885), exposure to countervailing opinions greatly benefits the human race via 'the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth' (Riley, 2003, p. 57).

Ironically, given YouTube's reputation for the quotidian and demotic, storytelling has been reinvigorated by creatorship on parts of YouTube, by being made more diverse and authentic. A new breed of hybrid creators is drawing on ancient and folkloric traditions of audience participation in a phenomenon which parallels to Gutenberg's invention of the printing press almost 600 years ago[5]. This is a bold claim. Storytelling is regarded as a defining characteristic of humans, originally developed as a strategy to 'sustain a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances' (Maggio, 2014, p. 92), convey essential information about the 'environment, behaviour of wildlife and the availability of food', and 'shape and form [human] experience' (Miller, 2014, p. 4). Digital storytelling predates the rise of social media platforms and was developed as a way for ordinary people to use computer tools to cease having professional media 'done to' them, and instead take 'the power (of storytelling) back' (Meadows, 2003, p. 192).

Importantly, YouTube users have evolved the platform into a creative primal soup. In post-industrial economies, innovation stemming from the mediated interactions of people and rapidly advancing socio-technologies, for example YouTube, are best understood as 'co-evolution' (Potts et al., 2008, p. 183). However, the originator of cyberpunk fiction, and the term 'cyberspace', William Gibson, captured this innovative process best '…the street finds its own uses for things' (*Burning Chrome* 1986, p. 199). Similarly, YouTube's now

ubiquitous socio-technological infrastructure originally began as a failed dating app, but its video-sharing affordances are now so prized, and so vast, it must be run by two deep neural networks or AI (Covington et al., 2016, p. 192). This socio-technology is nevertheless 'hackable' or simply 'useable' enough (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 100), to be adapted by ordinary folk in culturally significant, but unexpected ways. For cultural anthropologist, Michael Wesch (2010), YouTube enabled the revolutionary moment of 'universal film-making' where 'millions of little cameras have been linked together for the first time in history'. Indeed, Gibson's point was later echoed by YouTube's Kyncl, who said: 'it's an open platform, a lot of things happen in an unexpected manner…Ultimately, YouTube will become what its users want it to be. It's not really us deciding in the end' (Shields, 2017).

Yet, YouTube is poorly resourced for longer form, independent projects despite being among the best resourced of all media, social or otherwise. YouTube generated US$15 billion in annual ad revenue in 2019 (Alphabet, 2020), the legacy of the platform offering 'one of the oldest monetization schemes': its Partner program dates to 2007 (Kopf, 2020, p. 1). YouTube offers creators a 55/45 per cent split of ad revenue in favour of creators (Calacanis, 2013), a major motive force continuing to drive disruption to film and TV. YouTube is arguably the most innovative of the platforms, given its role in accelerating Netflix's pivot to streaming (Kyncl, 2017). YouTube is also richest in the most precious resource in the platform society: people's attention. With 70 per cent of the attention people spent on their phones watching the top five entertainment apps in 2019, YouTube is characterized as the 'frontrunner in the mobile streaming wars', far ahead of even China-based Tencent News, or the world's biggest SVOD, Netflix (Alexander, 2020). Nevertheless, in the nine cases in this book, I show how the much-critiqued algorithmic culture of YouTube (Gillespie, 2010, p. 358; Napoli, 2013, p. 10; Striphas, 2015, p. 395) – while often severely stressing many creators – paradoxically stimulated novel experimentation that better captured the zeitgeist. Principally a new co-creative, audience-centric, networked video production methodology that enabled publication of diverse, authentic stories to where hundreds of millions of viewers have fragmented to: in deep niches globally online. Difficult to be inauthentic when the online community you have built from zero is effectively present – via channel comment streams – during production.

I introduce the metaphor of the 'garden in the machine' to best capture two aspects of this newly adapted style of storytelling in algorithmic culture. When Postigo (2016, p. 333) was categorizing the nature of the digital labour of gameplay commentators on YouTube, he likened conditions to the 'machine in the garden': as commentators and channels use the platform's affordances to make a living, and their channels rise and fall, and are replaced by other hopefuls, YouTube's machine-like architecture – like the casino – always 'gets its share of the cash'. However, my deep dive among the platform's digital storytellers yielded two distinct new themes: first, crossover publication success based upon collaboration with like-minded creatives across the cultural, and often generational, divides.

As multi-Emmy-winning US web-series creator James Bland learnt after his first season of web-series crossover, *Giants* (2017–): 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together' (Ifeanyi, 2018). Second is a creator-led revival of audience participation in cultural production, I liken to that Peter Arnott (1989, p. 11) has described of ancient Greek theatre audiences. For example, Arnott says historical evidence points to these audiences being 'talkative and unruly', indeed 'participatory': 'the public was an active partner, free to comment, to be commented upon, to assist or to intervene', even reciting the lines of popular plays from memory when the memories of actors failed them. Based on these themes arising from the nine cases, I argue the assemblage of cheap, increasingly miniaturized video cameras and the YouTube algorithms, can be likened to Gutenberg's printing presses in two main ways: first, Gutenberg intended the press for one purpose, to homogenize the Catholic missal so he could sell more religious trinkets, but the powerful new technology was adapted by printers across Europe for their own individual publication interests (Epstein, 2008, p. 8). Second, the press led to a 'flood' of publication of classical texts and cross-cultural translations in the form of cheap books (Abel, 2011, p. 77), and thus the clash of ideas that drive innovation (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 107).

This book uncovers and shows the role of active audiences, web-series fans making reaction, and tribute videos, in enhancing creator and writer-producer sustainability. This evidence suggests lingering scepticism (Napoli, 2016, p. 342; Duffy et al., 2019, p. 4) towards Anderson's (2004) important new media theory of the long tail – which promised a democratization and diversification of

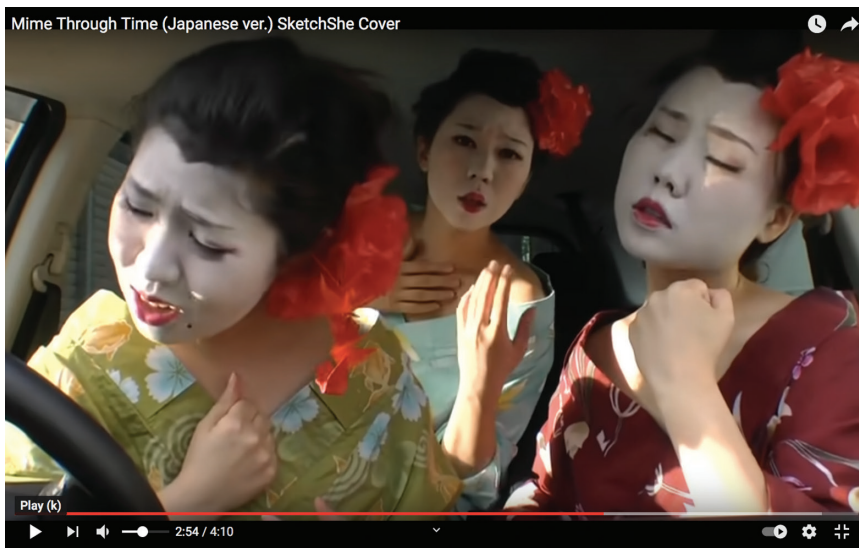

FIGURE 1.3 Prefiguring Tik Tok: YGmoA, a 2015 reaction video itself seen over 21 million times, radically spreading SketchSHE's original Mime through Time meme

cultural production – needs re-evaluation. For example, YGmoA's *Mime Through Time (Japanese ver.)* pictured above is a SketchSHE fan video, itself seen 21 million times since 2015. Prefiguring one of the biggest new youth apps of 2019, the lip-syncing Tik Tok, I argue these SketchSHE fans were 'writing themselves' into the *Mime Through Time* super-meme, for the aesthetic pleasures of collaboration, for monetization, skills acquisition, and peer recognition, and in the process, rising up the long tail of YouTube channel small businesses worldwide. Crucially, ethnic, cognitive, and cultural diversity has been strongly associated with the clash of ideas that can drive productive creativity (Higgs et al., 2008, p. 25), intercultural connections (Podkalicka, 2008, p. 332), cultural evolution (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 107), and political participation and citizenship (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 124). The cultural power of this new source of trained and diverse creators cannot be over-estimated.

Hollywood

Traditionally, for screen storytellers, careers were exemplified by the paradigm defined by Joseph Conrad, the Polish-English author best known for *Heart of Darkness* (1899): 'Art is long, life is short, and success very far off'. Creatives aspiring to excellence and glory looked to Hollywood, but had to fight their way up through gatekeepers, and routinely compromise, in often egregious ways, during the career climb. Denise Bielby and William Bielby (2002, p. 21) describe Hollywood as the cultural system that has dominated production and reflected and shaped mass culture globally for 80 years. But 'young White men' wrote about three-fourths of the film and TV scripts. For Sullivan (2009, p. 46), Hollywood was best understood via sociologist Leo Rosten's conception of three concentric rings: tens of thousands of movie-workers; 'the colony' of thousands of above-the-line actors, producers and directors; and at the pinnacle of cultural and financial power and prestige, 'the movie elite, some 250 persons'. For film authority David Thomson, Hollywood produced three of the world's six most 'profound' cinematic works of art: Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), and David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001). For Thomson (2012, p. 12), films represented an improved version of reality, where the medium's ultimate core was 'a way of realizing desire on the big screen'. But the price for creatives trying to make a living was high. Caldwell (2013, p. 162) characterized the industry as racialized, sexualized, gendered, and 'aesthetically salaried'. His fieldwork revealed a paradox: despite showing the industry was 'alienating, stressful and exploitative', hopefuls still flocked to Hollywood's gates. Younger workers especially were underpaid, underemployed, and 'paid' via a 'symbolic payroll systems' that allowed workers to 'stylize their public personas with trappings of artistry or legitimacy'. By 2016, the landmark University of Southern California Annenberg report on diversity in entertainment, concluded Hollywood still operated as a 'straight, White boys club' that marginalized women, ethnic, racial and sexual minorities, especially in decisive

above-the-line production roles (Smith et al., 2016, p. 16). By 2019, Oscar- and multi-Golden Globe-winning director Martin Scorsese likened Hollywood's highest profile output, the Marvel cinematic universe, to 'theme-parks. It isn't the cinema of human beings trying to convey emotional, psychological experiences to another human being' (De Semlyen, 2019).

Silicon Valley

A day's drive north of Southern California's Hollywood, lies Silicon Valley near San Francisco in Northern California. Manuel Castells (2010, p. 5) credits Silicon Valley with ushering in a new technological paradigm in the 1970s, the information technology revolution, the most successful companies of which drove the formation of today's network society, reshaping global social organization and practice. For Alice Marwick (2018, p. 314), Silicon Valley is the 'global centre for venture-backed technology start-ups', the culture of 'disruption and innovation' of which gave rise to social media companies such as Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Snapchat, Reddit, YouTube, Instagram, and Tumblr. In contrast to the premium talent, longform narrative, and IP rights protection model of Hollywood, social networks are based in 'user-generated content, peer-production marketplaces, collaboratively generated information and datafication', the model for today's most successful start-ups (Marwick, 2018, p. 314). Indeed, YouTube founders, Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim conceived the social network at Hurley's Menlo Park, California home in 2005, developing the software to more easily share digital home videos (Keith, 2007), especially for content shot on mobile phones, and as a catalyst for online connections such as dating (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 3). Consequently, Cunningham and Craig (2019, p. 4) argue a power shift occurred as a set of newly prominent online screen entertainment platforms, pre-eminently Alphabet/Google/YouTube, but also Apple, Amazon, and Netflix have increasingly represented a greater value proposition to the advertising industry, which has bankrolled TV since early last century. During 2021, venture capital firms had reportedly invested $US2 billion into '50 creator-focused start-ups' (Lorenz & Woo, 2021).

But business models using YouTube for community-building, monetization, and the quest for labour sustainability are only 12 years old. For example, the first indie artist to break through on the platform was Portuguese singer/songwriter Mia Rose in 2007–2008, followed by then unknown teen guitarist, Justin Bieber (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 33, 85). Around this time in Australia, the Van Vuuren brothers, who would go onto create the longform *Bondi Hipsters* and *SoulMates* for the ABC, and the Skip Ahead-funded, Canneseries-winning web-series, *Over & Out*, first broke out on YouTube with the viral, *Fully Sick Rapper*. However, most YouTube videos are under four minutes (Cheng et al., 2013, p. 1186). Crucially, YouTube industry leader Hank Green suggests narrative 'has been nearly impossible to make work' (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 148).

Meanwhile, in the shadows of cyberspace, the very first web-festivals emerged, still an unattached fraction of the dominant 6000-strong film festival circuit, but growing dramatically each decade. First was AOL's The Webby's of the mid-1990s. During the 2000s, the festivals and awards grew to three: the Indigenous Canadian Reelworld WebFest (RWF) in 2002; the Writers Guild of America's award for new media following the 2007 strike; and the Tubefilter and the International Academy of Web TV's Streamy's of 2009. The 2010s saw the rise of 14 webfests mainly in Europe, the Americas, Australia, Russia, and the most recently the United Kingdom. The first meeting of a dozen webfests, Festival Forward hosted by Canada's Dr Emilia King and Dan Speerin, occurred in early 2021, represented the avant garde of indie streaming. Nine festival directors attended via zoom to take stock of the fallout from the pandemic, and in generous public spirit, contribute to a new Australian Research Council-led longitudinal project on the web-series, to which this author contributes. Among the directors, there was general agreement producers had to be inventive to adapt to endemically low-budget packages; they had low visibility; online audiences did not want to pay for web-series; and there was a tendency for makers to hold a too-hopeful belief a distributor would lift them from the shadows, and commission a second series. However, the discussion showed just how vibrant and generative these volunteer festivals had become. Different festivals emphasized parallel missions of craft, talent, and business model development; the generation of IP in their series; their challenge to traditional structure; and their role as a 'freedom island' in helping marginalized communities find their voices. Significantly though, most festivals limited series entries to 20 minutes, preferably 12 or even just 6 minutes, to make awards selection manageable on judges. Overall, the view of the directors was immediate, direct financial returns are rarely there, but down the line, web-series potentially do a lot for creators' careers.

FIGURE 1.4 Indie film-maker Theo Saidden aka SuperWog uses cheaper, lightweight networked video technologies to get closer to their audiences online

Cable, and the rise of over-the-top (OTT) streaming services

Meanwhile, by contrast, quality longform storytelling – especially the serial narrative pioneered by Charles Dickens' serialization of *Great Expectations* (1861) – was occurring in one of the most surprising places: the former backwaters of American cable TV. Perren (2011, p. 138) traces the rise of paradigm-definers, HBO's *Oz* (1997–2003), *The Sopranos* (1997–2007), and Showtime's *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005), *The L-Word* (2004–2009), to this 'explicit', non-family-friendly originality in programming. Cable, which morphed into digital cable and the backbone supporting the present-day OTT streamers, offered writers 'greater creative autonomy, and minimal executive interference'. Crucially, in what is still a touchstone motivation for the creators in my nine cases, this tradition of creative latitude continues to pervade these hybrid digital outlets. Lotz (2018, p. 38) has shown how the most scrappy but innovative US cable TV outlets – HBO, Showtime, USA, FX, and AMC – upset the four-decade dominance of US broadcast networks, via a renewed focus on 'distinctiveness'. Distinctiveness, especially in the form of gritty, psychologically layered characters, attracted the news media 'buzz' required to cut through in the increasingly hyper-technologized, hyper-saturated media ecology, what Richard Lanham (2006) describes as the 'economy of attention' of the Internet. Consequently, what some regard as the latest Golden Age of TV Drama[6] was ushered in by the niche success of character-driven series such as HBO's *Sex in the City* (1998–2004) and *The Wire* (2002–2008). In 2013, the investment of $100 million by Netflix in *House of Cards*, made it 'the first web-based series' to win an Emmy (Ellingsen, 2014, p. 107). By 2017, the TV business – long regarded as a 'cultural wasteland' (Minow, 2003) – was producing record numbers of scripted series, a surprising number of which were 'excellent, and artistically ambitious shows', according to FX Networks chief executive, John Landgraf (Lotz, 2018, p. 11). This new rewarding of creative autonomy by the streamers quickly attracted the interest of creatives internationally. In Australia, one of the directors who put the country on the world stage, Gillian Armstrong (*My Brilliant Career*, *Last Days of Chez Nous*, *Oscar and Lucinda*), told the story of a colleague who went onto write and produce *Homeland* (2011–2020) for Showtime. In recruiting Ron Nyswaner, Armstrong said Showtime told Nyswaner: 'We want you to write something you really believe in: to go out on the line and be as brave as you want' (Donald, 2017, p. 111). For Landgraf, now is one of those rare periods where some platforms support artists 'to be truly brave, to resolutely follow their Muses in pursuit of Truth and Beauty'.

Hybridity

Hybridity – the offspring of different antecedents – explains the contending, generative, and adverse forces driving the evolution of mass media over recent decades. For Yochai Benkler (2006, p. 57), a hybrid media ecology has arisen as the participatory 'networked information ecology' has appropriated for its own

ends the exclusive rights-protected content of the 'industrial information economy', the latter represented by Hollywood and the recording industry. For Henry Jenkins and Mark Deuze (2008, p. 9), networks like YouTube – where 'some videos themselves develop cult followings getting referenced through mainstream media' – are corporately created 'hybrid spaces' where 'grassroots media makers' share their creations with peers. Lawrence Lessig (2008, p. 205) observed a 'collaborative hybridity' as Hollywood slowly included audiences 'in the process of building, spreading and remaking its product', but 'the story is not always pretty'. In Australia, 'hybrids' emerged as broadcasters combined appointment-based and stored media features through 'catch-up' streaming services (Screen Australia, 2012, p. 2). In the United Kingdom, Mark Banks (2010b, p. 315) described workforces as increasing 'hybrid': lightweight video technologies had led to the specializations of 'writing, directing, camera work, editing and promotion for distribution', being performed by the one 'all-rounder'. This all-rounder was attractive to capital, but Banks argues the 'downside is a weakening of accumulated knowledge [as] there are few mechanisms for sharing and spreading expertise'. For Caldwell (2016, p. 35), 'hybrid forms of imaginative/economic speculation', such as web-series, are part of the 'deregulated creative labour herd', which TV industries seek to exploit and monetize. For Cunningham and Craig (2019, p. 22), YouTube represents hybridity writ large, the 'interdependent clash of two world-leading industrial cultures': the old school of Hollywood in Southern California (So-Cal) and the entrepreneurialism of Silicon Valley in Northern California (No-Cal). Indeed, as Eurovision Australia producer, Byran Moses told me:

> An eye-opening moment was to see the YouTube Space in LA pushing towards a traditional old school: a huge studio set, pre-built sets, great camera gear. YouTube is trying to disrupt the mainstream market and help its content creators produce more professional quality content. YouTube is pushing to be the future of content.
>
> *Moses, 2018*

Drawing these strands of Hollywood, YouTube, and the streamers together, I argue the essentials from each tradition are expressed in the hybrid format of some of the biggest and most transnational web-series to date. From Hollywood, social media entertainment (SME), draws on the core skills of acting, screenwriting and directing (Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 104), in turn, key web-series skill-sets. From YouTube, successful creators learn algorithmic traction via Audience Growth Hacking, by understanding the very human – rather than merely instrumental – aspects of what motivates people to share creators' content widely. From the streamers, web-series makers pursue the all-important creative autonomy won by proven audience-builders, especially where they draw on diverse heritages to tell distinctive and authentic stories. Indeed, The Verge reported pre-eminent streamer HBO considered the social-media born web-series as 'the new

TV pilot', which for creators, represented 'a step towards the majors for this age of Peak TV'. HBO executive, Amy Gravitt, says web-series distinguish themselves from merely 'reading scripts', since the creators have 'the ability to go one step further than the page in conveying their tone' (Liao, 2017).

Five burning problems

In their drive to have their stories heard internationally – necessary to make a living since views alone usually pay so poorly – the creators and writer-producers in these nine cases went a long way to solving the problems bedevilling YouTube creators and TV producers alike.

Lack of monetization

Creators and TV producers who want to adapt faster to the new screen ecology are caught between a rock and a hard place. The lack of monetization of digital content is seen as the screen industry's 'most pressing problem' (Judah, 2015, p. 123), a challenge entwined with the sustainability of their labour itself. Indeed, the cases show lack of monetization has resulted in a distinctive, accelerated tempo of production that TV producer, Julie Byrne, in Chapter 4 on RackaRacka dubs 'fast and furious film-making' (Byrne, 2017). On YouTube, any effective creator must also deal with the platform's tendency to change rapidly and unpredictably, especially for the worse, over time. The period I consider is one especially marked by algorithmic volatility, and thus ever fluctuating platform-derived creator income. YouTube has adopted the mainstream advertising industry standard of Clicks Per Mille (CPM), where Mille is French for thousand. These CPMs have fluctuated from a healthy $7.60 in 2013 (Gutelle, 2014), but collapsed to $2 in 2015 (Dredge, 2015), although views from the Global South are not rewarded as well as those from the Global North (Britton, 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, and heightened screen consumption during shelter-in-place in the United States, CPMs varied from $4, to as high as almost $8 for some US creators (Weiss, 2020). Successful YouTube creators learn to deal with volatility via lucrative brand deals, but the commercial strings attached to deals means they do not work for most storytellers.

Volatility of algorithmic culture

Inside 'the black box'

Online creator precariousness is exacerbated by the socio-technological assemblage of the maths-based sets of codes, or algorithms, constituting the YouTube Recommender. The Recommender generates over 70 per cent of total platform views, estimated at 700 million hours of human attention daily (Algotransparency, 2019). Increasingly, scholarly and creator discourse has rightly focused on the

'shadowy', 'black box' nature of the YouTube algorithms (Bishop, 2018, p. 71; Burgess & Green, 2018; Cunningham & Craig, 2019, p. 103; Brevini & Pasquale, 2020, p. 1, p. 120). However, the argument in this book about the generative, but stressing role of algorithms on online creative labour, is based on explanations from Google software engineers, explanations unused by previous researchers. We now know from Google engineers' rights to publish their research on Google's AI blog, the Recommender is built on 'collaborative filtering' (Covington et al., 2016, p. 192). This filtering instantaneously matches a user's deep data history with a small corpus of hundreds of videos preferred by a demographically like-minded set of users, to rank and ultimately recommend a handful of videos tailored to the user. Crucially, these algorithms privilege 'fresh' content, and 'bootstrap and propagate viral content' (Covington et al., 2016, p. 193), a fact essential for better understanding the assemblage governing algorithmic traction, and thus the fate on which a video rises or falls and is monetized. The evidence from the cases shows this 'collaborative filtering' principle undergirds one of the five[7] key skillsets needed to succeed in the new hybrid screen ecology: Audience Growth Hacking. The Silicon Valley concept of 'growth hacking' was first promoted by former Dropbox marketer Sean Ellis. For Ellis, growth hacking is not platform instrument-driven, but traditional word-of-mouth virality based on 'making the experience of sharing the product with others must-have' (Ellis & Brown, 2017). Justifiably, Google machine intelligence designer Paul Covington et al. (2016, p. 191) describes the Recommender as 'one of the largest scale and most sophisticated industrial recommendation systems in existence'. The sheer anthropomorphic labour[8] involved in winnowing down billions of hours of video to the few instantaneously recommended to individual YouTube users' screens is so vast it must be run by two deep neural networks, or AI: Candidate Generation and Ranking (Covington et al., 2016, p. 192).

Many of the creators in the following nine cases launched their channels during the formative days of YouTube – some as early as 2006, the year Google bought it. Consequently, they have all have experienced at least two major YouTube algorithm changes, while four have experienced the most notable four algorithm changes: changes to promote older viral videos in 2016 (Alexander, 2019, p. 4; Cox, 2016); the brand safety reforms known as the 'Adpocalypse' of 2017 (Pottinger, 2018); and the subscription feed change in 2018 (Fox, 2018). Additionally, we will see in the SME-based stories how the algorithms prioritize new, trending, copied, collated, and controversial content, which clashes with creators' innate drive to originality and edginess. As YouTube veteran Ann Reardon wryly observes in Chapter 5: 'YouTube gets what it rewards'.

Divide between old and new media

Industry professionals are sceptical about the benefits of YouTube as either art or sustenance, and rightly so. An industrial rift between professional labour and new media workers drives a deep cultural divide where at the level of