Introduction

The picture in figure I.1 was taken in spring 2017 of a billboard located on the iconic Sunset Strip, where movie stars have featured on the hoardings since the golden age of Hollywood. The sign promotes a YouTube Red documentary, *This Is Everything*, directed by Academy Award–winning filmmaker Barbara Koppel (*Harlan County U.S.A.*) and starring Gigi Gorgeous. For most Hollywood tourists, or even Hollywood professionals, Gigi’s name and face may be unfamiliar. But for 7.2 million global fans and followers across YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook (Ifeanyi 2017), Gigi is the new “it” girl—and arguably the world’s most famous trans lesbian beauty vlogger. For nearly a decade, long before Caitlyn Jenner or hit series like *Transparent*, Gigi shared her transition from a teenage boy name Gregory to Gigi with her global fan community, who witnessed her progression from a makeup hobbyist to an advertising influencer partnered with global beauty brands. Gigi’s trajectory, including her transformation into an LGBTQ activist appearing on the cover of the LGBTQ magazine *The Advocate* with the headline “Trans, Lesbian, and the Face of an Online Movement” (Guerrero 2017).

Gigi was not alone. For the past few years, YouTube has posted campaigns promoting their most prominent “creators.” Like their Hollywood counterparts, creators are “next-gen” stars. Unlike their counterparts, these stars are also entrepreneurs, community organizers, and cultural icons populating a brand-new, if brand-focused, parallel media universe we are calling “social media entertainment.”

But the social media universe, of course, is not populated only with inspiring uplift. In the aftermath of the 2016 US elections, numerous accounts surfaced of nefarious content creators profiting by posting fake content on social media. This tsunami of fake news may have influenced the outcome of the election as it engaged in “anti-Clinton fervor,”
promoting Donald Trump’s candidacy and spreading right-wing news. Buzzfeed described how “Teens in the Balkans” earned up to three thousand US dollars a day “duping Trump supporters.” MSNBC and NPR interviewed creators who operate as members of a “new industry” (Craig and Cunningham 2017).

On the other side of the political spectrum, some of the most prominent US creators spent the election season promoting civic engagement, advocating for liberal causes, and championing Clinton. The Vlogbrothers, also known as Hank and John Green, launched a “get out the vote” campaign featuring their fan community—known as Nerdfighters—through a dedicated YouTube channel, “How to Vote in Every State” (2016). Prominent beauty vlogger Ingrid Nilsen interviewed President Obama and attended both political conventions on behalf of YouTube. Her advocacy resembles MTV’s collaboration “Rock the Vote,” with the
crucial difference that Nilsen represents a small business entrepreneur, not a multinational media conglomerate.

In turn, these creators risked not only offending fans but also the potential loss of advertising revenue and brand sponsors. LGBTQ creator Tyler Oakley championed Clinton to his nine million YouTube subscribers and six million Twitter followers. Oakley posted an interview with Clinton on the eve of the election entitled “Meeting Future Madam President” (2016). In addition to over sixty-six thousand affirmative responses (“thumbs up”), Oakley received more than ten thousand “thumbs down” from fans who may have unsubscribed from his channel and lost him revenue. In the case of Casey Neistadt, who promoted political topics and insisted that other creators come out against Trump, the BBC considered whether he had committed “YouTube suicide” (Varley 2016).

Since the election, these creators have continued to champion resistance to Trump, progressive concerns, and a healthier Fourth Estate. Nilsen and Oakley promoted and posted videos from the Women’s Marches. Neistat attended airport protests against President Trump’s immigration ban, and his video garnered over three million views in one day (Gutelle 2017a). Since then, Neistat has partnered with CNN and announced the launch of a YouTube-based news series along with apps aggregating vetted news content while filtering out fake news creators (Jarvey 2017a). Among numerous social media entertainment enterprises, the Greens continue to run Project for Awesome, an annual campaign that encourages creators to raise funds online for their favorite charities and help “decrease world suck” (ProjectforAwesome.com). Their 2016 campaign raised over $1.5 million for Save the Children and the UN High Commission for Refugees. These campaigns align with the topics of numerous Vlogbrother videos about the global refugee crisis and the conflict in Syria, which have been viewed by millions globally. These, and projects like Jerome Jarre’s #LoveArmy, which is presently fighting famine in Somalia (Jacewicz 2017), are but a few examples of next-gen creators dedicating their cultural power to global progressive causes.

After the election, Clinton reflected on the pernicious influence of fake news on politics. She described this phenomenon as an “epidemic” with “real-world consequences” (Gambino 2016). In contrast, these progressive creator activists arguably represent a palliative. At the very least, they affirm how this new medium of social media can be harnessed to
promote diverse political views. At most, although they did not prevail this past election, these next-gen culture warriors could prove vital to winning the next—while also helping to generate progressive change around the world.

Defining Social Media Entertainment

This is a book about these, and many, many more social media creators. It is a book about current and relatively recent incursions into screen media as we have come to know them over a century and more. It argues that the emerging shape of screen industries in the twenty-first century shows established players, norms, principles, and practices ceding significant power and influence to powerful digital streaming and social networking platforms. Just as notably, these platforms have started to represent a greater value proposition to the advertising industry that has served as the bulwark for main media since the start of broadcasting early in the last century. Creators have harnessed these platforms to generate significantly different content, separate from the century-long model of intellectual property control and exploitation in the legacy content industries. This new screen ecology is driven by intrinsically interactive technologies and strategies of fan, viewer, audience, and community engagement. Combined, these factors inform a qualitatively different globalization dynamic that has scaled with great velocity, posing new challenges for established screen companies, creatives, and regulatory regimes—not to mention media scholars.

The emerging shape of screen industries in the twenty-first century encapsulates deep changes in consumer habit and expectation, technology, and content production related “to a larger trend across the media industries to integrate digital technology and socially networked communication with traditional screen media practices” (Holt and Sanson 2013, 1). This emerging new screen ecology has not only given rise to major challenges to established media but is being shaped by a set of newly prominent online screen entertainment platforms, most prominently Apple, Amazon, and Netflix but also and preeminently Alphabet/Google/YouTube, along with others such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat.

Arguably one of the most challenging and innovative elements of this evolving screen ecology is the rise of “social media entertainment,”
or SME, as we will refer to it for the sake of brevity. We see SME as an emerging proto-industry fueled by professionalizing, previously amateur content creators using new entertainment and communicative formats, including vlogging, gameplay, and do-it-yourself (DIY), to develop potentially sustainable businesses based on significant followings that can extend across multiple platforms. The infrastructure of SME is comprised of diverse and competing platforms featuring online video players with social networking affordances, including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and Vimeo. These platforms have introduced commercial features that service their own interests but also affordances that entrepreneurial content creators have accessed to cultivate diverse business models and revenue streams.

This “industry” is only a bit more than ten years old, having started soon after the acquisition by Google of YouTube in 2006 and concurrent with the launch of Twitter and their counterparts in China, Youku and Weibo. By 2017, it saw more than three million YouTube creators globally receiving some level of remuneration from their uploaded content and more than four thousand YouTube professionalizing-amateur channels with at least a million subscribers. The top five thousand YouTube channels have received over 250 billion video views in aggregate. But these numbers do not translate into revenue in the same way as Nielsen ratings and television advertiser cost-per-thousand (CPM) rates. And some creators are securing sustainable careers with far fewer views and subscribers but much more engaged fan communities and richer brand deals.

It is important to stress the distinction between social media entertainment content and platforms and Hollywood-like content distributed, and in some cases increasingly produced, by the major “Internet-distributed television” portals (Lotz 2017) such as Hulu, Netflix, Amazon Video, and Apple’s iTunes. While these portals largely specialize in mainstream long-form premium content supported by sophisticated algorithmic feedback (Hallinan and Strifhas 2016), social media platforms offer scale, technological affordance, and—especially in the case of YouTube—remuneration and upskilling to previously amateur creators. We argue that SME constitutes a more radical cultural and content challenge to established media than the digital streamers (or portals).

It would be little overstatement to claim that these dynamics are a huge experiment in seeking to convert vernacular or informal creativity
into talent and content increasingly attractive to advertisers, brands, talent agencies, studios, and venture-capital investors on a near-global scale—with implications for content/entertainment formats, production cultures, industry structures, and measurement of audience engagement: “[T]he world has never before seen the likes of YouTube in terms of availability of non-infringing content” (Hetcher 2013, 45).

The book anatomizes this emerging proto-industry, taking an “ecological” approach by investigating the interdependencies among its elements: mapping the platforms and affordances, content innovation and creative labor, monetization and management, new forms of media globalization, and critical cultural concerns raised by this nascent media industry. Our anatomization has been based on deep, ongoing engagement in the field at many levels of the industry, principally through over 150 interviews with creators, platform and intermediary executives and managers, talent agents, technology integrators, and policy makers. While primarily focused on the United States, as that is ground zero of SME, our fieldwork includes interviews conducted in Sydney and Shanghai, Berlin and Beijing, London and Mumbai. We have attended and participated in industry events such as VidCon, the creator-focused trade and fan conferences run by the Greens, and assisted in the development of pop-up YouTube Spaces.

At the same time, our research is informed by similarly deep engagement with a wide range of issues and debates central to media studies, cultural studies, communication studies, and media management. These include the dynamics of participatory culture, minorities and the marginalized in media cultures, digital disruption of media industries, the rise of social media, conditions of creative labor, and new forms of media globalization. This book is the story of a proto-industry that has emerged at the intersection of the cultural, technological, and industrial dynamics tracked in these issues and debates. On the basis of this theoretical engagement, we are able to contribute well-evidenced, revisionist accounts in the political economy of new media (the clash of cultures of globally dominant media and IT corporations); construct an account of short-form commercializing online video culture as a highly normative space driven by appeals to authenticity and community; extend the debate on creative labor to include the precariousness of certain forms of media management; and
assess claims for a new wave of media globalization achieved without IP control.

There are some important caveats to this study. In 2017, it was estimated that one billion hours of YouTube are seen every day as compared to 1.25 billion hours of television per day (Solomon 2017). There were 1.5 billion monthly users, not counting people watching through links, shares, and downloads via other means. There was one hour of YouTube watched per day on mobile alone. This includes user- and professionally generated content. It is estimated, for example, that music makes up as much as 40% of YouTube content, with much of this promotional proprietary content from the big labels. And this is just YouTube. Since our initial research was conducted in 2015, Facebook has grown 25% to over two billion users while its platform partner, Instagram, has doubled in size to over eight hundred million users. But social media networking practices are not at all easily comparable to television viewing. The percentage of native SME creators operating on and across all these
platforms is impossible to assess, as we explain in chapter 1. Out of all these statistics, it is clear that SME as yet comprises a small part of the online content universe. Despite much scholarly concern over the “institutionalization” or “formalization” of video sharing, it remains probable that the significant majority of this activity occurs outside the kinds of commercial dynamics that support SME.

In this book, we are driven by a commitment to diverse voices nurturing their owned-and-operated businesses in pursuit of sustainable careers while engaging in media entrepreneurialism that may have profound ramifications for the future of content and cultural production. We are also committed to tracking cultural progressivity where it carves out space within commercializing systems. And, in the wake of the information catastrophe that unfolded around the 2016 US presidential election, it is arguable that the commercial environment within which SME operates inhibits the spread of alternative and fake news—is in fact a safer environment—because most brands and advertisers will not tolerate association with such affronts to civility and democracy.

The Specificity of Social Media Entertainment

This book examines claims for the specificity and distinctiveness of social media entertainment as it has emerged spatially across several industrial dimensions as well as temporally in the context of extraordinarily rapid change.

*The Challenge of Online Distribution*

The challenge of online distribution calls up the riposte to the oft-quoted saw: if content is king, then distribution is King Kong. The business history of the Hollywood Majors is a history, relatively speaking, of remarkable stability. However, in the decade from the early 2000s, the Majors tried, but largely failed, to establish themselves in online distribution. Instead, this emerging distribution space was occupied by Internet “pure-play” businesses—Netflix, Apple, Amazon, Google, Facebook—many of which are appreciably larger, and have much deeper pockets than the Majors (Cunningham and Silver 2013).
Challenges to media incumbents are, of course, not new. The rise of television in the 1950s threatened the incumbency of film studios, turning cinema audiences into home-bound viewers. Within a decade, however, television co-evolved and converged with Hollywood. The film studios became as codependent on TV for syndication revenue, particularly a newly launched subscription channel called Home Box Office (HBO), as TV had upon the content-generation and talent-management skills of Hollywood. The new screen ecology of home video helped sustain an independent cinema industry throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Similarly, the challenge of cable distribution represented a similar pattern of co-evolution over time, especially in programming. For example, with full distribution across the cable universe, most ad-based networks shifted their programming strategies to embrace Hollywood storytelling to secure larger audiences and higher advertising returns. The former Arts and Entertainment network evolved into A&E, and went from British coproductions to reality programming, while AMC has shifted from libraries of American Movie Classics to complex American TV series like *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*.

But this current challenge is not only in distribution. Netflix and Amazon have engaged in very significant investment in original programming, looking to function not merely as a distribution outlet for Hollywood movies and television but increasingly as destinations for their own branded premium content. Global interest in Netflix’s *House of Cards*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *Narcos*, and Amazon’s *Transparent* and *Mozart in the Jungle* have pundits breathlessly suggesting that “the traditional TV industry should be in panic mode” (McNab 2016). Amazon and Netflix have even emerged as platforms of destination for what was the former independent film market (Siegel 2016).

A crucial distinction lies in the underlying value proposition of these platforms. Amazon’s programs function as promotion, to sell memberships for its formidable e-commerce business. Similarly, Apple’s iTunes, which is limited to transactional and syndicated distribution while—at least up to 2017—avoiding the messiness of content production, fuels its core business of iProducts. In some respects, this is as it ever was. NBC was to RCA television sets as Disney has been to plush toys and theme parks, as Philco and Texaco were to broadcast, ad-supported television,
and as movie theaters are to popcorn and soda. In the professionally generated content (PGC) part of the new screen ecology, media content and distribution operate as means to an end for other higher-margin industries interested in selling products to consumers more than in storytelling for audiences.

Nevertheless, a notable comparison should be made between earlier outsiders engaging with Hollywood, such as the Japanese conglomerates driven by earlier business nostrums of synergy, and the Silicon Valley tech firms:

Throughout its history, Hollywood has tended to resist outsiders—except when they come bearing money. . . [T]hey have invariably been parted from their cash by studio executives and talent agents unable to believe their good fortune. . . Instead of handing over their money to the studios, as some naive international players have done before them, the streaming services have set themselves up as competitors. . . [T]hey are doing all the things that traditional movie studios do. (Garrahan 2017)

For social media entertainment, the video wars between Silicon Valley and Hollywood saw the rise of hybrid content–social networking platforms, most notably YouTube. These platforms offer open access (to users who can afford to access broadband and mobile systems with enough speed) for unlimited content of multiple modalities (video, photos, text) and innovative formats (vlogs, gifs, memes). In contrast to their digital TV-like competitors, these offer more than increasingly convergent video content players. They also nurture social media networking systems, comment sections and likes, emoticons and shares, friends and followers. And these platforms are appearing in diverse and competitive waves, from web-based platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook to mobile apps, like Instagram and Snapchat and (the now deceased) Vine. In The Culture of Connectivity, Jose van Dijck (2013) has importantly discussed how these platforms have engineered sociality. Here, we also account for how these platforms have facilitated a new mode of enterprise by millions of professionalizing and commercializing users through sociality online.
The SME Creator

We focus our attention on SME creators who started out as hobbyists with little intention of developing any form of income, let alone a sustainable career. The difference offered by the new screen ecology’s provision of potential career opportunity, even celebrity status, through amateur hobbyism and personal expression cannot be gainsaid. These creators disrupted the normative route through which media talent is filtered. YouTubers must be seen as a class of content creators who are able to exercise a higher level of control over their career prospects than in previous models of professionalizing talent. The head of the digital division of a leading Hollywood talent agency sums it up: “A traditional film or television artist—a writer, a director, a performer—has spent a certain amount of their life preparing to be ready for when opportunity knocks. . . . The mentality of a digital creator is the exact opposite. They’re not preparing for an opportunity; they’re creating it themselves” (Weinstein 2015). The distinctive career pathways and very low barriers to entry have meant that SME is more racially plural, multicultural, and gender diverse by far than mainstream screen media. And YouTubers gave rise to Viners, Snappers, and Grammers—enterprising creators adapting to and harnessing the commercial and technological affordances of the later platforms.

The rise of amateur content creators on new media platforms is not in itself new. Early amateur and nonprofit radio operators emerged out of the basements of American households. The development of home movie cameras launched a generation of filmmakers in their back yards. Garage bands and punk rockers began their careers in small venues, playing to friends and family. But the analogy ends there. The amateur broadcasters were “brushed aside” by a federally imposed commercial system (Streeter 1996, 251). To guarantee audiences, the filmmakers were forced to enter the film festival circuit or the studio system to secure distribution. The musicians were inevitably forced to sign with record labels, which controlled not only their distribution but also their destinies.

There is simply no comparison with SME creators—across multiple variables, not least of which is access to unlimited distribution across multiple platforms. In addition, the means of digital production afford not only low-budget production but virtually no division of labor
except at the topmost tier of the ecology. The creator has replaced the writer, producer, director, and actor above the line, as well as the editor, location scout, composer, and visual effects supervisor below. In addition, through the entrepreneurial agency afforded by these platforms, a content creator can operate as his or her own ad sales representative, securing partnerships with the platforms for split revenue. Creators also operate like online community organizers, cultivating a suite of practices—what Baym (2015) calls “relational labor”—to engage their fan communities for commercial and cultural gain.

With personal agency unlike anything in traditional media labor, these entrepreneurs leave their day jobs, if they ever held one, although admittedly for jobs that require operation around the clock. However, working conditions can be as onerous as they are precarious. Recent scholarship, focused less on YouTube creators and more on Instagram and beauty vloggers (Duffy 2015a; Abidin 2016a), describes how aspirational creator labor is often disappointed and creators’ livelihoods are often subject to capricious “tweaks” in platform algorithms and regulatory interventions. But such conditions can still bear favorable comparison with the average aspirant in Hollywood, an industry notorious for requiring years of underpaid dues paying and apprenticeship in toxic and demanding positions.

Content Innovation

These creator entrepreneurs are engaging in forms of content innovation that barely resemble that of legacy media. Prominent SME content includes gameplay, DIY/how-to videos, and, most remarkably, the personality vlogger. This content reflects the networked affordances of social media that allow for intense fan engagement and participation. PewDiePie's gameplay featuring his crude and off-color commentaries may reflect a cross between ESPN’s *SportsCenter* and Daniel Tosh’s US comedy show *Tosh.0*, but is equally grounded in the logics of interactive video games. HGTV, Cooking, and the DIY Channel offer linear accounts of house hunting, food preparation, and home renovation, but still require the production skills of a trained team of videographers, editors, makeup artists, and producers, not to mention the means of distribution afforded by cable. In contrast, the DIY subgenre of unboxing
often features, in some instances, a pair of hands, or a voiceover performer, coupled with a musical score, while audiences in the billions watch as toys and electronics are opened and assembled. “Assembly required” has become as simple as a click and play.

The hard-to-define personality vlogger operates at the business and cultural center of this new screen ecology. Perhaps there is a resemblance to the reality show persona, or the talk show guest, or maybe America’s Funniest Home Videos. But this genre (or format) exhibits far closer affinity with online communication staples such as the blog and features personalities sharing their quotidian experiences who now “own the world of YouTube” (Samuelson 2014). In contrast to the content creators in legacy media, these vloggers excel neither in storytelling nor in what we have come to define as media “talent.” But the mistake in evaluating the content innovation with this new industry would be to define their talent solely against norms of traditional entertainment storytelling, production, or performance. Rather, these creators have built a media brand based upon their personalities and through the intensely normative discourses of authenticity around vlogging.

The mediated authenticity of online vlogging, the appeals to the “real,” may be comparable to the rise of reality television were it not for the lack of mediators. No camera crews off screen and story editors in post contriving storylines only loosely inspired by the lives of the performers. This is commercialized, mediatized, agentic impression management (Goffman 1959). For these vloggers, YouTube is a stage, but they are more than mere performers. They sell the tickets.

**Interactivity**

This new screen ecology occupies a fundamentally convergent space between social media communication and entertainment content and is structured by a level of interactivity and viewer- and audience-centricity that is radically distinctive in screen history. The history of the screen audience is one of higher-and-higher-order claims about the industry’s responsiveness to viewer behaviors, needs, and wants, from William Goldman’s “nobody knows anything” (Goldman 1989) to movie test focus groups to TV viewing diaries to ratings. Fully fledged academic communication theories have been given over to studying viewer “uses
and gratifications.” More recently, these concerns have come under the aegis of audience and fan studies, stressing audience agency in decoding and using media messages and the deep commitments and creative engagements of fans in their co-creation of meaning with media producers (e.g. Jenkins 1992). Mainstream audience engagement has been preoccupied with creating the “water cooler effect” or “must watch TV” (the antecedents to “binge viewing”).

In the present, the PGC component of the new screen ecology (streaming services Netflix and its numerous national imitators, Amazon, and premium brands like HBO decoupled from cable packages) has tended to attract greater attention than the SME component because of its appeal to mainstream viewer demographics, essentially replacing linear broadcast mainstream entertainment options with a la carte options. Much has been made of the streaming services’ new affordances for “binge viewing” and hyper-targeting micro demographics (e.g. Anderson 2006). However, busting the tyranny of the linear schedule started decades ago with box sets, and the degree to which the newly dominant streaming services use big data to hyper-target viewer segments but engage in very little interactivity has given rise to critical concern over the power of the algorithm in contemporary entertainment (Hallinan and Striphas 2016).

In contrast, SME is a radical hybrid of entertainment and community development and maintenance. Subscriber or fan engagement is not only critical; it is what triggers the revenue-sharing business model that replaces IP control.

Global Reach and IP Dynamics

It is possible to posit a qualitatively new wave of media globalization based on the global availability and uptake of SME platforms, which is relatively frictionless compared to national broadcasting and systems of film and DVD release and licensing by “windowed” territory. And compared to film and television, there is very little imposed content regulation on the major platforms—some of the world’s largest information and communication companies.

For the major PGC streaming services such as Netflix, aggressive global expansion requires them to negotiate with preexisting rights
holders in each new territory and often requires them to close down informal means of accessing their popular content, such as VPN (virtual private networks) workarounds, in such territories. While, in the longer term, the streaming giants may well drive territorial licensing to the wall, SME content is largely “born global.” This is the case because SME, in contrast to content industries in general and Hollywood and broadcast television in particular, is not primarily based on IP control. Until 2017 and the launch of separate subscription video platforms, YouTube and Facebook elected to avoid the messy and legally cumbersome traditional media model of owned or shared IP. In turn, these platforms also avoided paying fees for content as well as offering backend residual or profit participation. Rather, YouTube entered into “partnership agreements” with its creators based on a split of advertising revenue from first dollar, a business strategy that Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Twitch, Snapchat, and other platforms have only in 2016–2017 introduced for their own creators.

The key difference between traditional media operating multinationally and YouTube is that the former produces, owns, or licenses content for distribution, exhibition, or sale in multiple territories, while the latter talks of being primarily a facilitator of creator and content.

There are significant reasons for YouTube not taking an IP ownership position, which have to do with its continued status as a platform or online service provider rather than a content company. The US Digital Millennium Copyright Act 1998, in addition to criminalizing circumvention measures and heightening the penalties for copyright infringement on the Internet, created “safe harbor” provisions for online service providers (OSPs, including ISPs) against copyright infringement liability, provided they responsively block access to alleged infringing material on receipt of infringement claims from a rights holder.

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Based on the argument that social media entertainment is a proto-industry, each chapter of the book examines a different, though interrelated, aspect of its emerging industrial status. Each chapter, therefore, can to some extent stand alone, although regular cross-referencing points the reader to the interdependent “ecology” of SME. Each chapter, moreover, engages with a key body of scholarly literature as it seeks
to explore more broadly the implications of this proto-industry for the study of media, culture, and communication in the twenty-first century.

Drawing on network economics and production cultures scholarship, chapter 1 frames the political economy of this new proto-industry as the extremely volatile, interdependent clash of cultures between Hollywood (IP-driven entertainment) and Silicon Valley (iterative tech experimentation), rather than as capitalist hegemons conducting business as usual. In chapter 2, we argue that the conditions of creator labor in social media entertainment are empowering at the same time as they are precarious. There is now a very substantial literature calling time on overblown claims for the autonomy and meaningfulness of work in the cultural and creative industries, whereas this chapter asserts that the origins of SME in amateur passion projects that become popular and commercially viable via the affordances of world-spanning platforms represent a qualitatively different scenario.

Regarding the intermediaries (e.g. multichannel networks, data analytics firms) as potentially as precarious as creator careers—perhaps even more so—chapter 3 explores their need to innovate even more rapidly than YouTube and the other digital platforms, and certainly more quickly than established media. Chapter 4, perhaps more than any other in the book, illustrates how different SME is from traditional content industries. Seeking to work with the self-understanding of core discourses of SME, we argue that it establishes its bona fides through differentiating itself from traditional media by highly normative claims to greater authenticity.

In chapter 5, we marshal the evidence that SME is more racially plural, multicultural, and gender diverse by far than mainstream screen media. We argue that online creator entrepreneurs, precisely because they are working in a commercializing environment, commit themselves to maximizing their cultural and community reach, and thus must position themselves between subcultural identity politics and broader publics. Chapter 6 treats SME’s near-frictionless globality, not as another instance of Western cultural imperialism, but as facilitated by content not governed by standard copyright industry high-control regimes. Concluding, we consider emerging developments that may presage further change and perhaps a new phase in the history of SME. Our final word is a call for creator advocacy in this extremely challenging proto-industrial space that is also replete with opportunity.
Building on current scholarship, we use a critical media industry studies (CMIS) approach that brings the concerns of macro-level political economy and cultural studies closer together. CMIS pays close attention to the political, economic, and social dimensions of popular culture and its production practices. What political economy and cultural studies often see as mass culture fatally compromised by commercialism, CMIS regards as a major focus for representation and contestation, often around marginalized and emerging groups: “Ignoring the logic of representational practices in entertainment production works to reinforce the relative invisibility or misrepresentation of those who often have the least power in the public sphere” (Havens, Lotz, and Tinic 2009, 250).

Havens, Lotz, and Tinic’s call for attention to “quotidian practices and competing goals” (2009, 236) is crucial for our project, with its sustained attention to everyday agents (the social media entertainment creators) and deep clashes of business culture (between Hollywood and Silicon Valley). Methodologically, we also align with their emphasis on midlevel fieldwork in industry, including, given the emergent nature of SME, the knowledge of the realities of new media practice acquired through interviews. Our project is to posit the emergence of a new proto-industry, so the relationship of social media entertainment to established media is a key analytical challenge. This means that we will be drawing on a range of research—some of which is new to the field—in social media studies, network economics, media management, and globalization as well as mainstays of media industries research such as political economy, cultural studies, and production studies.