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INFORMALITY AND INDETERMINACY IN MEDIA INDUSTRIES RESEARCH

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In a thought-provoking essay published in 2013, Nitin Govil poses a series of questions about how media industry research understands its central analytical category – industry. As Govil notes, much research into media industries is guided by a definition of industry as something "pre-given and stable," reflecting "a general understanding of what an industry comprises, with a tacit sense of its boundaries and capacities" (2013: 173). We can think here of the expansive literature on twentieth-century mass media – including broadcast television, radio, and newspapers – with their routinized production and distribution practices, publicly listed firms or state-run providers, and codified regulation. However, Govil goes on to suggest that the question of what constitutes an industry is not always straightforward, and that researchers in the field may need to "broaden the range of practices that count as industrial" (p. 176) in their analyses if they wish to account for the diversity of actually existing media industries.

The category of industry, as Govil argues, should not be taken for granted. Industries only exist to the extent that they are made visible through measurement, certification, and authorization. Govil uses the case of Indian cinema to interrogate some common assumptions about what constitutes a media industry. A vast and multifaceted ecology of production, distribution, exhibition, promotion, and merchandising, the Indian film industry spans multiple regional sub-industries and caters to a billion-plus passionate viewers at home and abroad. Historically, much of India's film output has been unmeasured, its revenues untaxed, and its finance murky. Cinema only attained official industry status in India in 1998, and a great deal of film spectatorship and production and distribution labor in India occurs off-the-books. "In the Indian film trade," Govil writes

> various practices produced disparate sets of numbers that only occasionally combined to convey an overall sense of "an industry" … as if the diversity and informality of film practice could not be aggregated into an industry in the modern sense.
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> *p. 175*

A key question for Govil is how industries *become* industries, and what is at stake in this category. He concludes by asking questions that our field might address in order to "introduce indeterminacy into the study of industry" (p. 176):

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> What are the provisional forms, sites, and practices that constitute media industries? What are the social, textual, political, and cultural infrastructures and interactions assembled under the sign of "industry"? What are these formal and informal processes of assembly, and how do exchange practices move in and out of industry status? In other words, how are industries "made up"?
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> *p. 173*

These provocations provide a basis for the present chapter, which explores how informal media industries and workers surface as a topic in media industry research. It considers various challenges for research in this area, and surveys recent studies that ask generative questions about how to conceptualize media industries. After some framing comments, the essay proceeds in three parts by considering research in the following areas: (i) informal media industries (including media piracy); (ii) informal employment in otherwise formal media industries; and (iii) the formalizing and deformalizing effects of digital platforms.

What is a media industry?

Govil's intervention highlights what is both a defining feature and an inherent limitation of the media industry research paradigm: the category of "industry" itself. Of course, the industrial status of the established, consolidated, and regulated sectors characteristic of mass media is not in question here. Television, radio, advertising, and publishing are all clearly industries in the sense that they have large and visible workforces, their own technical standards, metrics, and industry associations, and are formally (albeit unevenly) regulated in most nations. The centrality of these industries to how the field conceptualizes its object can be seen plainly in the chapter structure of key textbooks, such as *Media Today* (Turow 2019), which features dedicated chapters on book publishing, news, magazines, recorded music, radio, cinema, television, games, and the Internet industries. Likewise, the evergreen collection *Media and Communications in Australia* (Cunningham and Turnbull 2020) deals with the press, telecommunications, radio, video, television, magazines, advertising and marketing, popular music, Internet and mobile communication, and games. Certainly, some of these industries are more identifiably "industrial" than others: for example, commercial radio, with its limited number of licensed operators competing within circumscribed geographic markets, is a more organized sector than videogame development, where a vast number of independent developers (and a few giant firms) compete, and where freelance, outsourced, and offshored labor are common. Our knowledge of videogame development is usually more provisional than of radio, not only because of the emergent nature of digital media but also because research approaches, concepts, and empirical techniques for studying fragmented and globally dispersed media workforces are still evolving. Hence it is often necessary to ask different questions of different media industries, rather than employing a standardized analytical toolkit. It may also be necessary to modify sources, given that institutional archives, regulatory documents, case law, and official statistics may be unavailable for many media industries.

In *The Informal Media Economy* (Lobato and Thomas 2015), Julian Thomas and I explore the history of research into informal media and develop a framework for analyzing how informal and formal aspects of media industries interact. Informal media have distinctive organizational features that are not only worthy of study in their own right, but which can also enrich and expand our understanding of *all* media. A key research challenge is distinguishing between different *kinds* of formality and informality. Some media industries have unpredictable combinations of formal and informal elements, with the effect that they defy easy categorization (this

is often the case with digital media). We propose the concept of a "spectrum of formality" in which key characteristics of media firms, sectors, and entire industries – such as taxation, capital intensity, centralization, state oversight, labor practices, ease of entry, quality control, and so on – may occupy different positions along a continuum from formal to informal. This approach seeks to productively de-center the most common objects of media industry studies while at the same time opening a space for understanding a wider variety of organizational forms.

Informality has a long history in social science, economic, and policy research, and the term has been subject to sustained debate. We see informality as a productive concept for media industry research, as it evokes a number of interlinked phenomena, including informal labor, informalization, and the informal economy, which together draw attention to diverse forms of quasi-industrial activity not easily captured by conventional industry measurement. Jobbing scriptwriters, freelance designers, itinerant newspaper vendors, YouTube creators, and unregistered workers in device assembly plants can all be described as informal in the sense that their work occurs outside the boundaries of formal industry, while providing essential inputs into such industry. Over time, different activities are formalized or deformalized due to changes in technology, regulation, or social structure. Such diversity reflects the ever-changing boundaries – the "variable geometry" (Castells and Portes 1989: 26) – of the informal economy, and its shifting relationship to the formal economy.

Informal industries

A key consideration for research into informal media industries is the question of scale. Informal media industries may be very small, but they may also conversely be large, organized and highly productive. Examples of small-scale informal media include minority-language and ethnic media systems that address small or scattered audiences, and which have developed their own unique ways of producing for and distributing to these audiences. Jason Pine's (2012) study of Neapolitan pop music in Italy and Simeon Floyd's (2008) work on Quichua video in Ecuador document two memorable examples of such systems, which cater to defined markets within specific national contexts. Many diasporic media industries – which distribute goods across rather than within national borders – have also developed distinctive informal modes of organization, as documented in classic studies of Iranian (Naficy 1993) and Vietnamese diaspora video (Cunningham and Sinclair 2001).

Other informal industries are larger in scale. As Govil (2013) observes, Indian cinemas retain significant informal characteristics, including unconventional financing, partly undocumented workforces, and a dispersed theatrical exhibition network. A second example is Nollywood – Nigeria's enormous video industry – which is likewise unmeasured in its output, informal in its financing, and lacking the institutions characteristic of most national film industries, such as major studios, formal training, and accreditation systems. Nollywood has instead an exuberant and productive ecology of entrepreneurs, funders, and performers that work together to produce hundreds of feature-length movies per year, exporting them worldwide (Krings and Okome 2013; Miller 2016).

Media piracy too has long been of interest to scholars of informal media industries. Pirate markets for DVDs, books, and other media goods are by nature illicit, yet in many cases these markets are also highly organized and exhibit many of the same characteristics and rationalities of formal markets. Shujen Wang (2003), Joe Karaganis (2011), Ravi Sundaram (2009) and John Cross (1998) have studied the dynamics of pirate street vending in Asia and Latin America, using field methods including observation and interviews. Karaganis (2011) and Paul McDonald (2020) have analyzed the international organization of copyright enforcement by

government agencies, industry groups, and private actors. Collectively, this work challenges common assumptions about piracy as a disorganized sector of the media industries, revealing instead a more complex set of interactions between the formal and the informal.

Research into informal media industries can be found across multiple disciplines including anthropology, ethnomusicology, and business studies as well as media studies. Such research is instructive for a number of reasons. First, it prompts us to think creatively about what constitutes an industry and how industries may be described, investigated, and critiqued in a research context. By broadening our understanding of industry, it reveals connections between different kinds of institutions and markets. For example, Karaganis' analysis of legal and pirate DVD pricing showed deep interconnection between formal and informal markets, leading him to argue that piracy cannot be understood in isolation from "[t]he structure of the licit media economy" (2011: iii). Such research highlights structures, patterns, and innovations in the production and distribution of media content that can both parallel, or diverge from, equivalents in the formal media economy. Second, the nature of informal media industries requires scholars to be adventurous with methods, and to look beyond official metrics and other sources of empirical "truth" when studying a particular industry. In the absence of official records and national statistics, qualitative field methods including site visits, observations, interviews, and case studies are often used to study informal media industries because they can capture business practices, routines, and labor dynamics in a fine-grained way. This provides opportunities to link social-scientific and humanistic, quantitative, and qualitative, and critical and empirical modes of inquiry into media industries.

Informal labor practices

A second, related body of research investigates informal labor within otherwise formal media industries. Unlike the examples discussed above, which involve whole media institutions and markets outside the formal realm, the focus here is instead on informality within certain *parts* of an industry, rather than the whole. This brings into focus particular features of a media industries – such as employment practices – that exist in the "gray zone."

For example, research in media production studies and media labor studies has documented the project-based, freelance, and precarious nature of media production work. While some of this work is well-paid, much of it is unglamorous, low-wage labor where informality often has exploitative characteristics: unpaid internships are widespread, unionization is limited or absent, and an oversupply of aspiring workers suppresses wages. As Rosalind Gill observes,

> informality is the structuring principle in which many small and medium-sized new media companies seem to operate: finding work, recruiting staff, getting clients are all seemingly removed from the formal sphere governed by established procedures, equal opportunities legislation, or union agreements, and located in an arena based on informality, sociality, and "who you know".
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> *2011, p. 256*

This characteristic of media production work has been documented in other studies. Leung, Gill, and Randle (2015: 56) note that for freelance film and television professionals in the UK, "recruitment in the film and television industries is deregulated, informal and often ad hoc." Curtin and Sanson (2017), through their extended interviews with Hollywood screen professionals, document widespread informality of employment practices. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) use interviews and participant observation in three industries – magazines,

television, and recorded music – to investigate the pleasures and challenges of working in these notoriously nepotistic sectors, where personal relationships, "who you know" networks and intangible qualities such as passion and style are inordinately important. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker explain, the tendency of these industries to attract "creative people … who value informality" (p. 88) allows employers to exploit the blurry boundaries between work and pleasure. Here, the twin faces of informality become visible: the relaxed informality of a "no collar" (Ross 2003) workplace, and ultra-flexible employment practices that lack the labor protections associated with formalized employment.

Informal labor practices within what are otherwise organized and regulated media industries remind us that informal employment can be found – indeed, is even widespread – among high-wage professionals in the cultural industries of major cities in the Global North as well as in industries such as Bollywood and Nollywood. This provides an important corrective to accounts that associate formality with development and informality with underdevelopment, underlining instead the fact that informality is "a fundamental politico-economic process at the core of many societies" (Castells and Portes 1989, p. 15).

Media labor research has been enormously valuable because it reminds us that professionalized, regulated, formal industries are also fields in which many workers operate at the margins of salaried labor, outside of scrutiny and regulation. Such research foregrounds the heterogenous nature of media production, which involves both skilled and unskilled labor and paid and unpaid work. Keeping these informal aspects of media industries in the frame introduces that important element of indeterminacy – in Govil's words – into our analyses, and reminds us that even the most established media professions have aspects that are irregular, extra-legal, non-professional or artisanal.

One challenge for media labor research is how to account for and normatively evaluate profound variations in the organization of media work across different countries. At times, research on media labor has tended toward theoretical generalization about precarity, extrapolated from the experiences of a specific fraction of media workers in the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe. As Alacovska and Gill (2019, p. 197) argue, "the informality of creative work is multifarious, ambivalent and, above all, relational – embedded in local informal economies, neighborhoods and localized webs of collegiality, care and reciprocity." Hence, research into informal employment in media industries should be careful not to default to a universalized mode of critique but should instead attend to specific conditions of media work in the locations under study.

Informality in the age of platforms

We now consider a third strand of research that is asking important questions about informality in digital media industries. In recent years, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the formalizing and deformalizing effects of platforms, including social media platforms, on-demand service platforms, and business-to-business platforms. Such research explores how distinct processes of "platformization" – or "the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life" (Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck 2019, pp. 5–6) – are differentially impacting media industries,, workers, and institutional structures.

Consider the video platform YouTube and its vast global army of creators. Cunningham and Craig (2019) have documented the diverse motivations, revenues, and working conditions of YouTubers in several countries. From their analysis, it is clear that a great deal of YouTube video production remains informal in nature. Yet YouTube has strong formalizing tendencies as well,

bringing nonprofessional and do-it-yourself (DIY) media production into the sphere of private regulation, advertising, and automated measurement. Consequently, YouTube creator communities are increasingly characterized by disputes over monetization, revenue shares, advertiser fraud, and takedowns – an unusual combination of amateur and professional concerns.

Sophie Bishop (2020) has explored new kinds of media professions and services appearing in the interstices of the YouTube economy. Bishop's study describes how a new breed of entrepreneurial "algorithmic experts" – intermediaries who advise YouTube creators on how to increase visibility on the platform – are seeking to bring a more structured character to the wild west of user-generated content by making platforms amenable to the established measurement, attribution, and promotional techniques used in marketing, while also peddling their own, sometimes questionable services. This example shows the subtle formalization that has been occurring throughout social video platforms, as those platforms have shifted from the margins to the center of contemporary marketing, while also pointing to the informal ways of working that characterize many service providers around the edges of the YouTube economy. In this way, Bishop's research provides a fresh perspective on a tradition of media industry research concerned with understanding the intermediaries that "proliferate in the space between production and consumption" (Negus 2002, p. 502).

These examples show the paradoxical effects of platformization on video culture. On one hand, YouTube has clearly expanded the terrain of video production and distribution by providing a space for amateur content to circulate freely, and has also been accused by major rights-holders of deformalizing video industries by allowing rampant copyright violation. On the other hand, YouTube and its growing number of ancillary service providers seek to professionalize content and creators by raising standards, removing problematic uploads, automating copyright enforcement, and instilling an entrepreneurial sensibility attuned to the needs of YouTube's advertiser market. Unquestionably, the YouTube platform has had both formalizing and deformalizing effects on video production.

Alongside this literature on video platforms, other research is investigating the hidden low-wage labor that sustains major social media platforms. In a major study of content moderators, Sarah T. Roberts (2019) documents the vast yet invisible workforce of "cleaners" that assess potentially offensive posts on social media platforms. These workers are spread all over the world, from Silicon Valley to the Philippines, and frequently work under highly irregular and informal conditions. Some are employed directly by platforms, others by intermediaries. Most are lowly paid and all are regularly exposed to extreme and upsetting material.

Other research concerned with documenting hidden online labor looks beyond media platforms to consider the many different labor-hire platforms that enable users to hire others to complete small tasks. Gray and Suri (2019) and Tubaro and Cassili (2019) analyze the hidden manual "microwork" (repetitive testing, labelling and tagging work) integral to the development of machine learning and other artificial intelligence applications. This microwork is often organized through on-demand labor platforms, such as Amazon's Mechanical Turk (a crowdsourcing marketplace through which businesses can outsource jobs, processes, or project to be conducted virtually by a globally distributed workforce) and is undertaken from workers' homes on a piecework basis for a few cents or dollars per task. Gray and Suri offer a strong critique of these practices, noting "on-demand labor can quickly become alienating, debasing, precarious, and isolating ghost work" (2019, xxvi).

Sociologist Juliet Schor and her research team interviewed more than 300 platform workers and service-providers in the US, including Uber drivers, AirBnB hosts, and TaskRabbit tradespeople. Schor's research emphasizes the divergent experiences of these individuals – from well-off urban professionals renting out their apartment on Airbnb through to lowly paid workers

for whom on-demand gig work replaces traditional salaried roles in industries such as security and transport (Schor and Attwood-Charles 2017; Schor 2020). In contrast to critiques of platform labor that directly equate platformization with exploitation (Scholz 2017), Schor and her collaborators offer a more nuanced account, emphasizing the wide variance in the conditions and affordances of platform labor and the lack of a uniform "platform effect":

> the question of whether platforms are empowering or immiserating workers depends to a significant [extent] on the specific platform being examined, as well as its temporal trajectory. Platforms not only change policies and procedures but also confront an evolving institutional ecology. Furthermore, platform workers are differentially positioned in terms of the assets they bring to the work and their dependency on these income streams. These dimensions are important for understanding why some workers praise platform work, whereas others are extremely critical of it.
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> *Schor and Attwood-Charles 2017, p. 7*

As Schor and Attwood-Charles argue, attention must be paid to the specificities of each platform, its workforce, and its socioeconomic context. A microwork task remunerated at a few dollars may be more or less appealing to workers depending on a range of factors including average wages in their countries (noting that such work is often globally distributed). We need to calibrate our normative assumptions about what constitutes "good work" to the specific contexts, histories, and norms of particular platforms and their diverse workforces. At the same time, the question of *who* extracts most value from the labor transaction – the employer, employee, or platform – is also a vital consideration. The politics of informal platform work, like the politics of informal media production discussed earlier, resist simplistic diagnosis.

Most of the published English-language literature on platform labor has focused on American and European experiences, or on the global dispersion of taskwork mediated through US-based platforms. However, recent work on platform labor in Asia offers a timely reminder that Silicon Valley is not the only crucible in which futures of informal work are being invented. A growing literature documents the experiences and impacts of platforms, platformization, and platform labor in China (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018; Sun 2019; Chen and Qiu 2019), India (Kumar 2019; Athique and Parthasarathi 2020), and the Philippines (Soriano and Cabañes 2020), among other nations.

A major contribution to this literature is Elaine Zhao's book *Digital China's Informal Circuits: Platforms, Labor and Governance* (2019), which explores the platform dynamics of Chinese app, mobile, video, and transport services. Drawing on interviews with taxi drivers, electronics salespeople and software developers, Zhao explores how Chinese digital platforms have evolved over time, amid evolving state policies for telecommunications, information, and data industries. Her analysis foregrounds ongoing interactions between markets, the state, and China's informal economies, with the effect that Chinese digital media industries emerge as hybrid formations spanning the formal–informal divide.

A key focus for Zhao is how current working practices in Chinese tech firms utilize informal labor for cost reduction, speed, and talent recruitment. Zhao describes a patchwork of elite and indentured workers, fans, and entrepreneurs all contributing diversely to China's mature platform economy. Zhao stresses that informal workers do not benefit equally or participate for the same reasons:

> Indeed, multiple publics participate in these informal circuits, including profit-motivated entrepreneurs, enthusiastic fans, creative users and necessity-driven,

> on-demand laborers. Some are pressured into the informal economy with little option otherwise, while others venture there to seek entrepreneurial gains. Some step into the informal zones for fun while others are subject to precarious conditions. Some are located in the illegal zone while others are in the grey area, which can be more innovative than is generally assumed. Indeed, between black and white are many shades of grey.
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> *2019, p. 131*

Zhao's remarkable analysis is grounded within the social histories and political economy of contemporary China: its rapid marketization following accession to the World Trade Organization, its vast rural–urban migration, and the state's ongoing policy interventions in technology, information, and creative industries. As Zhao explains, the specificity of these conditions means that analysis of formal–informal interactions in China cannot uncritically apply drag-and-drop frameworks designed for other countries. Zhao pays close attention to how the boundaries between the formal and the informal manifest in different parts of China and how these boundaries are shaped by patterns of local, regional, and national governance. Describing how the state variously organizes, regulates, invests in, and also withdraws from media industries, Zhao argues against a "simplistic state-market dichotomy in approaching informal circuits in China's digital media economy," instead urging attention to "both converging and diverging interests between the state and market" (p. 13).

Conclusion

This brief journey through the research landscape has shown that the category of "industry", so fundamental to the field of media industry studies, requires constant interrogation. As we have seen, industries come in many different shapes, sizes, and degrees of formality and informality. While the history of media industries is often narrated through the prism of formal institutions, informality remains a constant feature – and informal labor practices are widespread even in the most regulated and institutionalized sectors.

Research in the field can therefore benefit from retaining an open-minded view of what constitutes a media industry. This creates a productive indeterminacy – in Govil's words – that allows scholars to appreciate connections between diverse practices, systems, and institutions, and to interrogate commonsense thinking about how industries operate and evolve. Despite the obvious challenges of empirical research in this area, a rich body of literature now considers these questions, often using qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, and case studies to capture the texture of informality from the point of view of those involved.

As I write this in late 2020, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are rippling through media industries across the world, causing widespread disruption while also unleashing new innovations in media production and distribution. While the long-term implications of COVID-19 for media industries cannot be currently predicted, the events of 2020 suggest a range of uncertain futures that may include mass unemployment and under-employment, reduced consumer spending, increased tele-working, and deepening platformization of service industries. One possible lesson that media industry scholars may like to take away from these disruptions is that institutions, business models, and commercial practices that once seemed solid and durable may in fact be more vulnerable than we realized, and that formal structures sometimes rapidly give way to more informal and ad-hoc ways of doing things. Seen from this perspective, the traditions of informal media research surveyed in this chapter remind us that the industrial forms central to twentieth-century media are products of historical formalization

but also that these long-term trajectories of formalization are not guaranteed. Media industries research must therefore be prepared for a range of possible futures, including those involving deformalization of media work and institutions.

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