

Conditionally Assetized Online Cultural Labour

paper for 14th Annual Critical Finance Studies Conference

Institute of Mediterranean Studies, Rethymno, 2023

Emily Rosamond

Emily.Rosamond@gold.ac.uk

On YouTube, lifestyle vloggers, hobbyists, product reviewers, self-styled newscasters and exercise instructors, among many others, carve a niche in a crowded field. YouTube seamlessly merges ‘amateur’, ‘aspiring professional’ and ‘professional’ production; top YouTubers earn millions, while the vast majority make no money. Those with at least 1,000 subscribers and either 4,000 valid public watch hours in the past 12 months or 10 million valid public shorts views in the past 90 days can apply for the YouTube Partner Program (YPP), which offers content creators a share of the advertising and YouTube Premium subscription revenue their channel generates, as well as access to other monetization services, such as brand partnerships. Qualifying for the YPP involves attaining the requisite subscriber and view counts, entering a ‘human review’ queue to determine suitability for advertisers, and engaging in ongoing self-certification processes to assess videos’ advertiser friendliness, among other criteria. How is it possible to understand YouTube’s new, experimental model of remuneration as an emergent theory of platformed cultural labour? Critics of online microcelebrities’ labour conditions have often used terms like ‘aspirational labour’, ‘emotional labour’ and ‘affective labour’, extending post-operaist debates on immaterial labour and feminist critiques of (unremunerated or otherwise exploited) affective labour into online cultural production. It is certainly true that cultivating online microcelebrity involves giving labour ‘freely’ in hopes of, one day, getting paid; and exacts an emotional toll on cultural producers, who must manage ‘intimate’ fan relationships in bulk. Nevertheless, such critiques miss how the YPP has developed its own, practical-experimental ‘theory’ of platformed cultural labour and its exploitation, which I call *conditionally assetized online cultural labour*. When the YPP remunerates online cultural production, its logic is incommensurate with both Marxian abstract labour, and the neoclassical util as an abstract unit of utility. Rather, it is based on the *asset value* of that labour: the future revenue streams it generates, predominantly through advertising revenue and premium subscription fees, at the moment users engage with a channel. For content creators, monetizing channels is conditional, as it depends on meeting the YouTube Partner Program’s complex, changeable, and uncontested *assetization threshold* criteria – its heterogeneous assemblage of qualification and assessment processes. It is hardly novel that all but the most successful cultural producers go unremunerated; one could think of many prior examples across the cultural industries. However – despite its reputation for enabling ‘participatory’ culture to flourish – YouTube creates a new, platformed logic for the vast inequality of remuneration in cultural production, under the guise of ‘participatory culture’: via advertising and subscription revenue, *all* cultural production is a potential asset to the platform; however, via YPP criteria, only *some* is an asset to cultural producers themselves. Understanding the YPP’s experimental theory of online cultural labour enables new understandings of how the *casualized* conditions of online cultural work are commensurate with platforms’ *capitalization* on online cultural work, by introducing financial understandings of asset value (such as net-present value) into the remuneration of labour.