Professionalization of Amateur Production in Online Screen Entertainment in China: Hopes, Frustrations, and Uncertainties

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The strategic pendulums of the online video space in China have swung between amateurism and professionalism over the past decade. Coevolving with platform strategies is the expanding online screen ecology, where entrepreneurial creators have become a considerable source of economic and cultural value. This article seeks to go beyond the professional/amateur dichotomy and examine the professionalization of amateur production in China's online video space. It begins by tracing the initial enthusiasm toward user-generated content (UGC), the subsequent frustration and disillusionment, and then the resurgence and revalidation of UGC when platforms attempt to professionalize amateur production with a dynamic perspective. Following that, it analyses prominent productions by professionalizing amateurs, the creative strategies and potential barriers as they negotiate creativity/commerce/community relations, while navigating platform politics and the regulatory landscape. By so doing, this article reveals cultural and political implications of the emerging form of digital entrepreneurship found in professionalizing amateurs in China.

Keywords: user-generated content, entrepreneurship, amateur, professionalization, online video, diaosi, positive energy, copyright, cultural policy, Youku, Tudou, Sohu, UniMedia, rage comics, Dapeng, China

The collapsing boundary between production and consumption is evidenced in the hybrid terms such as "pro-am revolution" (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004) and "produsage" (Bruns, 2008) in media communications and cultural studies literature. An increasing body of research has emerged with the focus on "amateur media" (Hunter, Lobato, Richardson, & Thomas, 2013), or the "informal" sector (Lobato & Thomas, 2015). Optimists have championed "vernacular creativity" (Burgess, 2006) and "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Although microproductivity occurring among distributed individuals has become a source of economic and cultural value (Hartley, Wen, & Li, 2014), pessimists have pointed to the mediocrity of amateurism and its potential effects in drowning out professionalism (Keen, 2007). A more reconciliatory, while still critical, approach goes beyond the dichotomy of professionalism versus amateurism and proposes the notions of co-creation, and amateurs as entrepreneurs (Banks & Deuze, 2009).

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Although much literature has focused on the altruistic motivations and the democratic potentials of user-generated content (UGC), it offers only a partial perspective when framing user creativity as an essentially noncommercial activity. As Lange (2008) reminds us, it is a synchronically laden categorization to assume that people who post videos on YouTube were, are, and always will be "ordinary" in terms of professional training, aspirations, and reputation. In the context of increasing professionalization and monetization of previously amateur content creation (Kim, 2012), it is an opportune time to go beyond the professional/amateur dichotomy and study the coevolution between the two to understand the hopes, frustrations, and uncertainties in the process.

The evolution of online screen entertainment over the past decade has seen the pendulum swinging between amateurism and professionalism. Although YouTube, as the forerunner in this space, started as a video sharing site, it has "continuously morphed as a result of both corporate practices and audience use" (Burgess & Green, 2009b, p. 3). As Kim (2012) observes, the platform is undergoing "institutionalization" from user-generated to professional-generated content. Similarly, according to van Dijck (2013), "a far cry from its original design, YouTube is no longer an *alternative* to television, but a full-fledged player in the media entertainment industry" (p. 127). Meanwhile, the online screen ecology continues to evolve. Many amateur creators use digital platforms to develop subscriber/fan bases of significant size; many generate revenue from advertising and user subscription; and many are becoming full-time businesslike entrepreneurs (Burgess & Green, 2009a). As a significant part of the evolving screen ecology, professionalizing amateurs have witnessed the co-evolution between market and nonmarket, cultural and economic, commercial and community in developed economies (Cunningham, 2012; Cunningham, Craig & Silver, 2016; Cunningham & Silver, 2013).

In China, digital platforms including online video sites have rapidly become alternatives to officially sanctioned institutions in cultural production, distribution, and consumption. Most online video platforms have their roots in amateur practices, facilitating flows of content unavailable in the official marketplace, including overseas and/or censored productions, as well as original content created by users with easily accessible equipment. The online video space has gradually formalized based on advertising-supported or subscription-based business models and with the influx of capital in recent years. Meanwhile, high-profile cases of entrepreneurial online video creators have emerged as a significant part of the evolving screen ecology and have become more integrated into the formal economy (Yu, 2015; Zhao & Keane, 2013). These entrepreneurial content creators receive a share of the sizeable revenue from advertising or user subscription. This article examines professionalization of amateur production in China's online video space by situating the analysis in the context of the evolution of online video platforms. It begins by reviewing the career of UGC in strategic maps of online video platforms, from initial episodes of hopes and euphoria to subsequent periods of frustration and disillusionment. It then examines the shift towards professionally generated content (PGC) and the consequent formalization and consolidation of the online screen space. Following that, the article tracks the resurgence and revalidation of UGC as platforms start to develop a dynamic perspective of it. It analyzes platform strategies of professionalizing amateur production, their motivations, and potential implications for entrepreneurial amateurs. Following that, it draws on cases of productions by professionalizing amateurs to examine their creative strategies. By zooming in onto the employment of *diaosi* (roughly translated as "loser") archetype and injection of *zhengnengliang* (positive energy), it critiques the attenuated public discourse and state co-optation of the

emerging form of digital entrepreneurship. It also analyses entrepreneurial amateurs' strategies in community engagement and uncertainties arising from copyright politics. By reflecting on professionalizing amateurs' experiences in negotiating creativity/commerce/community relations, platform politics and the regulatory landscape, this article reveals cultural and political implications of professionalization of amateur content.

From Hopes to Frustrations: Shifted Focus From UGC to PGC

In China, online video sharing platforms started to emerge around 2005, modeling after YouTube. The pioneers such as Youku, Tudou, 56, and ku6 were largely privately held platforms, receiving critical support from international venture capital, including Sequoia Capital, IDG Capital Partners, Draper Fisher Jurvetson, and many others. Initially, the majority of these sites envisioned a future of a thriving community of amateur creators sharing original videos online, which was to be monetized later. Thus, UGC quickly became an industry buzzword. Although the term *user* comes with inherent diversity (Lange, 2008), most platforms hoped to attract those who do not necessarily possess sophisticated production skills. Indeed, the low entry barrier in terms of budget, equipment, and expertise attracted many grassroots amateurs. Creative, humorous, and sometimes socially and politically critical, many user-generated videos spread quickly online, and some have become huge Internet phenomena in China (Voci, 2010). The lip-synching videos of Backdorm Boys (*houshe nansheng*), for example, are more lighthearted. One of these is a spoof video of the Beijing 2008 Olympics theme song, expressing Chinese people's disappointment in the national football team. Examples of those with more political thrust include *The Bloody Case That Started From a Steamed Bun (yige mantou yinfa de xue'an*) and *The War of Internet Addiction* (*wangyin zhanzheng*). The former mocks eminent Chinese film director Chen Kaige's 2005 mega-budget film *The Promise* and CCTV's signature pretentiousness in news broadcast. The latter critiques the Internet censorship imposed by the state, the profit-driven gaming companies, and so-called experts who subjected young "Internet addicts" to electroshock therapy. Both take a specific form of what Gray (2006) describes as "critical intertextuality": antagonistic satire with the power to "reevaluate, ridicule, and teach other genres" (p. 4). Meanwhile, creative productions by users decentralize the state-controlled mediascape, and online video platforms provide an alternative cultural space.

To become the prime destination for content sharing and consumption, online platforms endeavored to sharpen their competitive advantages. Youku, for example, tried to establish its selling point in "smooth play, quick publishing, and easy search" (2006, para. 8) in 2006 to appeal to users at a time when narrow bandwidth rendered uploading and publishing videos a painful experience. Its slogan of "*Paike* (amateur videographer) is everywhere" and "Anyone can be a *paike*" (Huang, 2007, para. 10) intended to facilitate the culture of amateur video creation and scale up the online video-sharing market. Similarly, Tudou's slogan of "everyone is a director of life" (Tudou, n.d., para. 2) since its incorporation reflected its intention to cultivate a reservoir of amateur content productions. The annual Tudou Video Festival has become a signature event held by Tudou since 2008, launching many talented content producers into the limelight. These initiatives shared the invocation of YouTube's tagline in its early years—"Broadcast yourself" (Burgess, 2015). It can be seen that the hope of these platforms at the time rested on the lowered barrier to video sharing in attracting a large number of creative users beyond the professional circle.

The business prospect of online video platforms, however, was crippled by the mixed quality of UGC. Moreover, content uploaded by users often involved copyright infringement risks, facilitating underground circulation of overseas or censored productions. Worse still, the large amount of uploads created a diseconomy of scale, where platforms suffer bigger losses when they attract more viewers because they lack a viable business model and yet have to bear the enormous bandwidth costs. Plans for advertising or user subscription models proved to be a pipe dream as a result of mixed-quality and the sometimes infringing nature of UGC. Thus, frustration with UGC was widely shared among industry practitioners at the time. Tudou's founder, Wang Wei, for example, referred to UGC at an industry conference in 2008 as "industrial waste water," owing to its low quality, huge consumption of bandwidth cost, infringing risks, and hence its weak ability to generate profit despite high-volume traffic.

Consequently, Tudou established the Black Bean (*heidou*) channel in 2008, dedicated to content acquired from domestic and overseas premium content providers. This marked a major shift in the platform's positioning from targeting amateur videographers to focusing more on online viewers of film and TV. This was modeled on Hulu's model of repurposing TV shows and movies for advertising venue online, which proved at that stage more promising than YouTube's.

As the industry was vexed by the conundrum of seeking commercial value in UGC, the large-scale government crackdown on online video streaming and downloading sites in 2008 and the subsequent licensing regulation to establish industry entry barriers further pressured the online video sites to seek an alternative path, namely, acquisition of PGC (Zhao & Keane, 2013). The state action resulted in a major industry shakeout, where many infringing sites withered away. The state action could be seen as a response to the pressure from domestic and international copyright owners and legal regimes about copyright infringement, which remains rampant because China has yet to liberalize its media market in the post-WTO era. Moreover, and perhaps more important, the state crackdown on the mostly privately owned infringing sites served the purposes of sanitizing and formalizing the market to pave the way for the entry of state-operated media, including state and provincial broadcasters, into the online video space. Following the state regulation, the industry witnessed a voracious pursuit of copyright, fueled by capital and the resulting skyrocketing licensing cost. At this stage, copyright became "a main form of capital" (Lash & Urry, 1994, p. 136), and the financially resourceful platforms bet big.

The great leap in licensing cost caused continued consolidation of the online video market. While many have simply exited the market, there has been an increase in mergers and acquisitions as well as IPOs (initial public offerings) at domestic and international stock markets since 2009. This included Shanda's acquisition of ku6 in 2009 and the subsequent IPO at NASDAQ in 2010; iQiyi's acquisition by Baidu in 2012 and its merger with PPS in 2013; the merger of Youku and Tudou in 2012, forming Youku Tudou, which was acquired by Alibaba in 2015. The formalizing market has attracted new entrants including state-owned media and Internet giants. Although the former, such as online video arms of state and provincial broadcasters, is more an extension of the established media to the online world, the latter, including those owned by China's three Internet giants, collectively known as BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent), has intensified competition in PGC acquisition and exerted more influence on the industry landscape.

While carrying the hope of cultivating thriving user communities, UGC has created cultural and social values not only through content but also through the practice of production, circulation, and consumption (Yang & Jiang, 2015). Ranging from the mundane, the humorous, to the socially and politically critical, UGC practices can be understood as creative expressions, social lubricant, and sometimes political resistance. Yet, mainly as a result of its threat to the advertising-based business model and state regulation, online video platforms have started to shift their strategic pendulums from amateurish UGC to premium-quality PGC. The industry has consequently experienced rapid and Draconian formalization and consolidation.

The Comeback of UGC and a Dynamic Reconceptualization

Although UGC faded into the background during the years of vigorous investment in professional productions since 2010, this does not mean a decisive discard of UGC. In fact, in conveying Tudou's vision to investors during its IPO at NASDAQ in 2011, CEO Wang Wei mentioned the hybrid strategy of building a "YouTube + Hulu + HBO" comprehensive media platform that is based on UGC + original film and TV + in-house content (Y. Yang, 2011). Although the competition in the pricier precinct of professional productions continues, such investment does not deliver user loyalty. The report released by The China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC, 2011) revealed the average number of platforms viewers use is 4.5, and more than 34% viewers use six or more platforms in online screen consumption. Viewers often hop from one platform to another depending on which platform acquired the films or TV programs appealing to them. In the case of nonexclusive content, viewers go for the platform where advertising is the shortest. This pushed online video platforms to consider alternative strategies to establish points of differentiation and enhance viewer loyalty. Original content has thus become increasingly important.

Under such context, UGC stages a decisive comeback on the strategic maps of online video platforms. This time, platforms adopt a dynamic view of UGC and hope to nurture their own talent. To encourage and promote original UGC, Youku Tudou launched a revenue-sharing program in 2013 similar to the YouTube Partner Program. While users could share videos on these platforms in China for years, this program marked the first time online platforms offered a share of revenue to content creators. Moreover, apart from an expedited upload channel, content partners' videos receive prioritized recommendations and higher rankings in search results. These changes in algorithms reflect the strategic intention of the platform. Youku Tudou also offers participants offline training, including cinematography, digital marketing, and case-study seminars. Within four months of launch, top video creators earned between US$3,500 and US$10,000 per month from a diverse range of content, such as education, humor, games, and animated commentary (Youku Tudou Inc., 2013). Similar to YouTube's initiative to develop its own talent, these moves demonstrate the interpenetration of very different industry cultures, namely, the IT-innovation model based on technological affordances/rapid prototyping/algorithms and the time-honored mass-media and premium content strategies (Cunningham, Craig, & Silver, 2016).

The emphasis on original content is accompanied by the rebranding of Youku Tudou Inc. into Heyi Group in 2015. *Heyi*, literally meaning harmonious union, captures the venture's mission of building an ecosystem where various types of content providers take part and generate value. Both entrepreneurial amateurs and professional content producers are part of the big picture. The launch of the new brand at

Youku Tudou's open ecosystem conference is supported by a 10 billion RMB (US$1.6 billion) plan to drive the development of individual channels (known as *zipindao*) dedicated to made-for-Web original content. The plan aims to nurture 100,000 channels with more than 1,000 subscribers; 10,000 channels with a monthly income over 10,000 RMB (US$1,600), and 100 channels with a market value above 100 million RMB (US$16 million). As Victor explains, *zi* (roughly translated as "self") can be understood in terms of self-reliance, uniqueness in style, and self-promotion (Sina.com, 2015). This means creators aiming to do well in *zipindao* need to possess the capability of attracting fans through content production and promotion to gain reputational and economic rewards.

Youku Tudou's *zipindao* strategy establishes a tiered system aiming to attract and nurture novices, amateurs, and semiprofessionals. Any registered user can establish a channel by uploading a video, which suggests openness and inclusivity of the strategy aiming to build a large pool of creators. These content creators are then rated based on average daily viewing time of their videos over 180 days from Tier 1 (under two hours) to Tier 12 (over 50,000 hours). Under the tiered system, additional features and support are on offer, provided that creators can demonstrate the ability to attract an audience in the crowded market. These include the capacity to upload sizeable videos, synchronized upload to both Youku and Tudou, and receive accelerated approval for publishing. Apart from these efficiency-oriented features, various revenue streams can be activated as creators move up the tiers, including receiving 70% of the advertising revenue, receiving contribution from fans, adding an overlay to prompt viewers to purchase products online and receive a 90% share of the revenue, and activating a paid subscription channel. Moreover, support mechanisms are in place for "worthy" creators to promote their channels. These include features that enable creators to display channel logos in uploaded videos, receive prioritized placement in search results, and enable bullet screens (*danmu*), where viewers can send comments via text messages to be projected directly on screen (Youku, 2015). Overall, these features afford more opportunities for creators to achieve better efficiency, diversify revenue streams, enhance fan engagement, and strengthen self-promotion.

The hope of the platforms lies in promoting the entrepreneurship ethos so that professionalizing amateurs can internalize it, willingly take risks in creative production, and engage in continuous learning to generate marketable content. Climbing the ladder established by the platform becomes a self-making process. Although there are promises of self-(re)defining and self-actualization, entrepreneurial content creators need to take on more work than content production. This could include not only content promotion but also continuous self-branding. As Marwick (2013) insightfully points out, "Self-branding encourages people to take on the responsibility of economic uncertainty by constructing identities that fit current business trends" (p. 305). For online video platforms in China, it is as much about promoting entrepreneurial drive to nurture marketable content as it is about saddling individual creators with risks inherent in creative production.

In facilitating content production, Youku stresses very much the originality of content. By launching the feature of Youku certification of originality, it draws on the lesson from the initial development of video sharing sites and reduces infringement risks associated with UGC. This feature opens the door to further support for content creators who have achieved certain popularity (above Tier 5). These include the implementation of a digital fingerprinting system, for copyright protection where

revenue gained from infringing content will be returned to original creators, and priority placement in search results and recommendations. However, creators under Tier 5 do not receive "official" certification of originality and associated support from the platform, even if their content is original. For creators at the lower end of the tiered system, the differentiated treatment means that the platform is not to be relied on in asserting their rights. Rather, the purpose of the platform is to identify promising talent, enhance audience loyalty, and diversify revenue streams. Once promising talents are identified, they receive further support in product promotion, longer-term contracts, and coproduction deals to push them upward along the "career ladder."

The imperative to cultivate original content is evidenced in other platforms. One year after Sohu's acquisition of the video-sharing site 56.com, Sohu Video launched the plan to promote online video production in late 2015. Producers of original content, be they individuals or organizations, can apply for their own channels. Sohu announced the plan to invest 200 million RMB (US$30 million) in supporting online video producers in 2016, with 3 billion RMB (US$462 million) worth of marketing resources to assist video producers in attracting viewership over the next three years (Ding, 2015). Content providers will receive 40% of the advertising income for their video screenings on Sohu, and those who provide exclusive videos will receive up to 60% of the revenue. Moreover, creators attracting high volumes of traffic have the opportunity of landing coproduction deals with Sohu.

As online video platforms face the challenge of enhancing viewer loyalty, UGC has staged as a strong comeback as a part of the overall strategy of facilitating original content production. The inclusive approach and the tiered system illustrate the platforms' intention to target content creators possessing varying degrees of professional expertise. As Youku Tudou's Chief Product Officer Gu Sibin explains, *zipindao* is a prime destination for video entrepreneurs, be they amateurs or professionals (China.com.cn, 2015). In analyzing YouTube's investment philosophy in relation to UGC, Postigo (2016) likens the platform to "a bettor at a roulette table who is in the happy position of betting on all the numbers, where the payout *in aggregate* outweighs what appears to be an otherwise wild investment" (p. 15). The metaphor is also applicable to Youku Tudou, as it is betting on content creators at different points of the amateur–professional spectrum. As UGC returns to the center of the strategic map, it is no longer associated with amateurish practices only, but is conceived as a dynamic concept that has the potential to move toward the professional end of the spectrum. To drive such a move toward professionalization, the online platform provides further incentives and support to those with market viability.

The Archetype of *Diaosi,* the Injection of *Zhengnengliang,* and the Politics of Co-optation

As online video platforms aim to attract video entrepreneurs, some former amateurs grounded in the grassroots culture have already professionalized, with commercial success, with the most adventurous starting their own ventures. While vloggers on YouTube present a carefully constructed self by documenting details about their lives and thoughts to attract fans (Griffith & Papacharissi, 2010), successful professionalizing amateurs in China have captured *diaosi* as a key archetype in the contemporary society to resonate with the audience. A vulgar term in Chinese roughly translated as "loser," *diaosi* refers to young people who are financially poor, physically unattractive, and unlucky in love

in contemporary China. Initially coined to mock these people, *diaosi* has ironically become a social label embraced by people as a form of self-mockery and identity making and has become a popular Internet meme since 2012. The term signals Chinese youth's disillusionment with apparently stagnant socioeconomic mobility and allows them to "create a sense of community, a point of affective identification that crystallises through the power of online address" (Szablewicz, 2014, p. 268). Seeing the *diaosi* phenomenon as a case of "infrapolitics," Yang, Tang, and Wang (2015) points out it "fuses political critique, cultural processes of identity construction and meaning-making as well as cyber ritual communion" (p. 197). The self-mockery nature is a veil over the sociopolitical critique it carries, which allows for the term and relevant creative content production to gain popularity under China's censorship regime.

The sketch comedy Web series *Diors Man* (*diaosi nanshi*) is a successful case of employing the *diaosi* archetype. The series was written, directed by, and starred Dong Chengpeng (commonly known as Dapeng) under the label Sohu Original. Trained as an architect and initially working as an online editor at Sohu, Dapeng started to make the talk show *The Dapeng Show* (*Dapeng debade*) in 2007 to nurture his own fans. *Diors Man* debuted in 2012 and saw its fourth season in 2015, a testament to its popularity. As the series went into the third season in 2014, Sohu established Dapeng Studio, which became part of its in-house production strategy. Led by Dapeng, the studio shares its revenue with Sohu (G. Zhao, 2014).

Dapeng admits that he draws inspiration from the German television comedy series *Knaller Frauen,* aired since 2011, which witnessed lukewarm reception in Germany yet encountered unexpected success in China (Poettgen, 2012). The series initially circulated online in China with subtitles provided by fan groups before Youku acquired the online distribution right and streamed it on its platform. The Chinese title *diaosi nüshi* (meaning "female loser"), the result of arbitrary translation of subtitle groups, has triggered the debate over the core connotations of *diaosi*. While it resonated well with some audiences, who saw the word capturing the positive, self-deprecating spirit that urged women bound by social norms to live with resilience as grassroots people did, others believed what the *diaosi* were up against in the Chinese context was vastly different (Chang & Ren, 2016). The Chinese context is indeed what inspired Dapeng to produce a Chinese version of the series. When a sample was completed, Dapeng sent it to Zhang Chaoyang, Sohu's CEO, who found it entertaining and allocated some budget to the project. The first season cost 0.6 million RMB and the second season 1.5 million RMB (Xiong, 2014).

The online talk show *Baozou Big News Events* (*baozou dashijian*), launched by Morrill Mocci Entertainment Ltd. in early of 2013, has also struck a chord with viewers by capturing the realities faced by *diaosi* in China. Cofounders of the venture, commonly referred to as Wang Nima and Wang Nimei, gave up their day jobs at investment banks and started by bringing the popular genre of rage comics emerging in North America to China by setting up a rage comics website (baozoumanhua.com; *baozou manhua* means "rage comics" in Chinese). Building on the fan base of rage comics, *Baozou Big News Events* has harvested many viewers. The show features the host, Wang Nima, wearing a mask (designed based on the protagonist in *baozou manhua*), and commenting on social events and news with humor and satire in front of the camera. The genre of rage comics can be traced back to a post on 4chan and then caught on among amateur creators. A typical rage comic consists of four panels featuring simply drawn characters with exaggerated facial expressions and usually concludes with a rage face expressing exasperation,

anger, or resignation. Although both e'ago and rage comics serve as vehicles for emotional catharsis, rage comics usually conclude with a sigh of resignation to reality, unlike e'ago spoofs, which tend to challenge the powerful and/or the authorities with more rebellion and aggression (Chen, 2014). Such resignation in rage comics exemplifies, as Chen (2014) draws on Barmé's terms, the "graying" of Chinese culture, a syndrome that "combined hopelessness, uncertainty, and ennui with irony, sarcasm, and a large dose of fatalism" (Barmé, 1999, p. 100).

The *diaosi* archetype is also found in *Surprise* (*wanwan meixiangdao*), a flagship Web series produced by UniMedia (*wanhe tinyi*), founded by engineer-turned-online-video entrepreneur Yi Zhenxing (commonly known as Joy Show, or Jiaoshou) with two former executives at Tudou. The series' protagonist, Wang Dachui, is a typical *diaosi,* who keeps encountering embarrassing or unlucky situations that surprises him. The Web series has won the hearts of Chinese viewers as it captures the harsh reality experienced by ordinary people who often practice self-mockery yet cherish a slim hope of rising above the reality they are in. While Wang faces frustrating reality, as a widely-spread quote of Wang goes, "I feel like I'll soon get a promotion and pay raise, marry a rich and beautiful woman and reach the pinnacle of my life"! This, according to Joy Show, illustrates "an upward spirit and positive hope for the future," thus demonstrating and conveying "positive energy" (*zhengnengliang*; Yuan & Zhang, 2014, para. 3). By capturing a key dimension of Chinese people's self-perception and creating emotional resonance with viewers, *Surprise* reaped huge success among online viewers.

Interestingly, the conveyance of "positive energy" has been a major strategy advocated by the state in recent years. In a speech at the 13th Chinese Online Media Forum in 2013, Lu Wei, Minister of Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), established in the same year, called for the need to create positive energy for the Chinese Dream. At a Chinese Communist Party forum on arts and culture in 2014, President Xi Jinping told artists present at the event that works of art and literature "should be like sunshine, blue sky and the spring breeze, inspiring minds, warming hearts and cultivating taste" ("Art Must Present," 2014, para. 2). Cultural creation, said Xi, should brim with "positive energy," which refers to positive and uplifting content and attitudes as opposed to critical and negative ones. Since then, "positive energy" has become an important concept in news and official discourse.

It is evident that professionalizing creative amateurs are carefully navigating between the state and the market. Creative strategy walks the "party line" (Y. Zhao, 1998) of conveying "positive energy" and creates emotional resonance with ordinary Chinese at the same time. For the entrepreneurial director, adding the veil of "positive energy" also enhances the prospect of expanding to the silver screen, which is subject to stricter censorship. In the case of *Surprise,* its namesake film, directed by Joy Show, was released in 2015. Yet social and political criticism carried by such content has become attenuated, as the creator directs viewers' attention more to the self than to the social and political infrastructure in their consideration of the stagnation of social mobility. The focus shifts from why things are the way they are to how people should adopt "positive thinking" to find a way out of frustrating reality. In this sense, the employment of "positive energy" along with the *diaosi* archetype by entrepreneurial content creators shows the ironic compliance to the state discourse, which attenuates the social critique carried by the term. That being said, it should be noted that critical potential is not completely lost considering the

existence of "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990), where the so-called positive energy can be contested by viewers.

Moreover, entrepreneurial content creators often adopt self-censorship. Because content may step over the line, Wang Nima, for example, is not hesitant in admitting that he supports various organizations in "overseeing" content and cuts whatever Youku asks to cut (Qu, 2015). As a result of the Chinese Internet becoming a "panopticon" under the party-state, self-censorship on the part of platforms and content creators has become internalized (Tsui, 2003). Professionalizing amateurs are thus caught in the imperative to strike a balance between creating market appeal and maintaining political correctness.

Both the response to the call for "positive energy" in employing the *diaosi* archetype and the application of self-censorship demonstrate entrepreneurial amateurs' compliance with the official discourse and the state's co-optation of the emerging form of digital entrepreneurship in China. This is not entirely new. Indeed, co-optation of entrepreneurs has been a longstanding strategy of the party-state, which has proved to be largely successful mainly because of its shared interest in promoting economic growth and private entrepreneurs' stake in preserving the political system that has allowed it to prosper (Dickson, 2007). As Lagerkvist (2011) points out, the information and communications technology (ICT) sector has also witnessed a growing public–private alliance in the development of a harmonious Internet, that is, a sanitized and pacified online environment. While Lagerkvist (2011) directs attention to digital media platforms, emerging professionalizing amateurs as a new force in the digital media ecology face a similar scenario where they have to carefully negotiate the political and economic boundaries in creative content production.

As digital platforms have endeavored to push the professionalization of amateur hobbyism, the state has also called on individuals to join the cause of "mass innovation and entrepreneurship" ("*dazhong chuangye, wanzhong chuangxin*") in 2015 ("China Eyes Mass Innovation," 2016). Concomitant with the agenda is the "Internet Plus" initiative unveiled by Premier Li Keqiang in 2015. As a prescription for the ailing economy, the plan carries hope for economic restructuring through integration of the Internet and various sectors, including creative and cultural industries, which has become a pillar industry since the 12th Five Year Economic and Social Development Plan (2011–2015). This marks a new stage in China's cyber strategy, where the state intends to capture the full potential of the Internet as a force of promoting innovation by relying on the masses. It, however, does not disguise the continuing use of the Internet as an instrument of control (Austin, 2014). Recent strengthening of Internet content regulation is evidenced by President Xi's unsubtle reminder of the importance of creating "socialist literature and art," both online and offline (Mai, 2015). This may further entrench the state's practice of co-opting the emerging form of digital entrepreneurship in China.

Community Engagement and Uncertainties Arising From Copyright Politics

Although entrepreneurial creators need to ensure the appeal of content to viewers, community engagement is equally if not more important. Users have co-created value at different stages of creative production. Take *Diors Man,* for example. To embed the series into the Chinese reality and resonate with Chinese viewers, Dapeng employs a crowdsourcing approach to content development by reaching out to a

group of writers on Sina Weibo, China's Twitter-like service. These people provided their scripts to Dapeng for some remuneration, who then screened these and developed the script for the show (Li, 2013). Before releasing an episode, Dapeng usually invited 50 to 100 people, via Weibo or online forums, to an internal viewing, whose responses to each act designed to be funny in the episode were rated in five scales based on the act's comicality. The result then informed further refinement of the episode (Xiong, 2014). This allows the creative team to capture audience response and gradually develop an acute sense of audience taste. Over time, initial skepticism toward "copying" an overseas show has died down. Meanwhile, Martina Hill, who is well known in China for her part in the German show *Knallerfrauen,* was more than happy to see a successful localized version and made cameo appearance in *Diors Man* in its fourth season.

The creative production process of *Surprise* is another example. UniMedia employs many writers, who review trending posts on microblogging platforms and discuss the possibility of weaving these into the script (Zhang, 2014). Once an episode is published, Joy Show will carefully go through online comments and respond to audience feedback in script developments in the future. Community engagement for the new generation of entrepreneurial content creators is critical to the production process and resulting revenue. As Cunningham and Craig (this Special Section) insightfully point out, these professional amateurs are actively engaged in social media entertainment, which is a radical hybrid of entertainment and community development and maintenance, or "communitainment." Moreover, the creative team also receives back-end data from Youku Tudou, where skips and repeated views indicate varying audience interest in different parts of the episode. As van Dijck (2009) points out, it is crucial to recognize the role of users as data providers. This however does not discount the importance of community engagement. Both viewer engagement and data monitoring inform the trial-and-error approach to content production.

In the case of *Baozou Big News Events*, it had cultivated a community of fans in rage comics before embarking on online video production. Fans often draw on stock rage faces and employ tools, often known as rage comic generators or rage makers, to create their own comics and express their frustration of daily life with self-depreciating humor. As an amateur-driven aesthetic of Internet Ugly (Douglas, 2014), rage comics democratize participation where rage makers and the growing range of stock faces allow users to create content with ease. By the end of 2015, Rage Comics receives more than 30,000 submissions of user-generated comics (36kr.com, 2015). The vernacular creativity in the community provides resources that the team often draws on in the online video production.

Moreover, community engagement is also evidenced in distribution strategy. For example, *Baozou Big News Events* is distributed on ACFun and Bilibili apart from Youku Tudou. The former two are leading bullet-screen video sharing sites in China. Bullet screen (*danmu* in Chinese, or *danmaku* in Japanese) refers to the feature that allows viewers to share comments instantly, which are overlaid directly onto the video and synced to a specific playback time. This feature was first popularized by Japanese ACG (animation, comic, game) video portal Niconico. Such a multiscreen, "connected viewing" experience (Holt & Sanson, 2014) has reinvigorated the meaning of liveness while creating a sense of sharedness among audiences. Through distribution on bullet-screen video sharing sites in China, the show has been able to connect with Chinese ACG fans, who embrace the transnational flow of bullet-screen culture. Therefore, the show is a hybrid of transnational cultures of rage comics and bullet screen in

format, with the content very much embedded in the social and cultural realities of contemporary China. Such hybridity facilitates user contributions and community building anchored in the local context, which contributes to the popularity of content.

As evidenced above, professionalizing amateurs continue to draw on amateur creativity. Such amateur creativity is evidenced not only in providing raw material to entrepreneurial creators but also in creating value and meaning in connected viewing experiences. Although there are successful cases, tensions have emerged between contributing users and professionalizing entrepreneurs and as a result of the fissure in the copyright governance models of different platforms.

The Q & A comic show *Big Sister Knows* (*xuejie zhidao*), produced by UniMedia exclusively for LeTV, encountered such challenges in drawing on the wisdom of crowds. To produce the show, Joy Show intended to collaborate with Q & A forum Zhihu.com and use the answers provided by users to various questions as creative material. However, the collaboration did not materialize. One major reason is that Zhihu's users maintain copyright of original content contributed to the community, and Zhihu has no right to sublicense UGC on its site. Therefore, any third party wishing to use content generated by users on Zhihu has to ask for each individual user's permission. This creates barriers to drawing on UGC in the community. UniMedia then had to seek another partner, Guokr.com, for the project, which in its lengthy terms and conditions force its users to give up their rights and grant the platform to "a perpetual, worldwide, exclusive, royalty-free, irrevocable license, with the right to sublicense" (Guokr.com, 2015). Here, users do not own their content, which renders collaboration with UniMedia possible.

Although UGC seems to provide a sustainable source of creative material, drawing on UGC embodies uncertainties in relation to contemporary copyright politics. These are manifested not only in the ultimate ownership and control of the creative production output but also in terms and conditions of enabling platforms. In commercializing their productions, entrepreneurial amateurs face a key challenge in the conflict of terms and conditions that structure different platforms in potential collaborations. As platforms differ in copyright ideologies and governance models, potential collaborations for professionalizing amateurs are structured by those who own and control the means of production, interaction, communication, and community building (Andrejevic, 2009). When a platform forces users through terms of use to grant the former the right to use their personally generated content in any way the site chooses, amateurs-turned-professionals as well as the platform can benefit from the collaboration. However, such a possibility is based on asymmetric power relationships between Internet service providers and users. While former amateurs transform into entrepreneurs, the need for a sustainable source of creative content drives them to maintain the social side of production. However, they may find themselves joining digital platforms in exploiting UGC to generate value and derive commercial benefit from it. In such case, professionalizing amateurs "internalize the violence and alienation that structured the terms of the choice itself" (Andrejevic, 2009, p.49).

Entrepreneurial amateurs who rose to fame from grassroots culture, where cultural commons facilitate productions characterized by sharing, pastiche, and bricolage, may thus paradoxically stand on the other side of the copyright ideology and co-opt with platforms in exploiting UGC. Having their feet in both camps means entrepreneurial amateurs need to exercise caution in drawing on UGC. This reflects not

only contradictions in platform politics (Gillespie, 2010) but also tensions between the economic rationale behind the formalization of the industry and resilient sociocultural norms in creative production. For professionalizing amateurs, negotiating creativity/commerce/community relations while navigating platform politics and the regulatory landscape remains a continuing challenge.

Conclusion

The past decade has seen the metamorphosis of China's online video space under a combination of cultural, market, and state regulatory forces and the influence of Western models. In this process, UGC has oscillated between strategic highs and lows before platforms developed a dynamic view of it and revalidate its value. Coevolving with platform strategies is the expanding online screen ecology, where entrepreneurial creators have become a considerable source of economic and cultural value. These entrepreneurial amateurs align their hopes of reaping commercial success with online platforms' strategy of cultivating original content to maintain viewer loyalty. For platforms, the divide between amateurs and professionals comes second to the cultivation of large volumes of original content in the hope of benefiting from the commercially viable few. As these platforms have witnessed skyrocketing licensing costs when they single-mindedly pursue PGC, the intention of maximizing the value of a viable UGC brand is not surprising. By building up the infrastructure to identify promising talents and the mechanism to further their careers, online platforms benefit by shedding the risks in content investment and reaping profits from the most promising talents. For entrepreneurial amateurs, the hope of self-(re)defining and self-actualization calls for not only creative content production but also content promotion and self-branding.

Grounded in the grassroots culture, professionalizing amateurs approach content production through trial and error as they stay close to the community and elicit creativity and feedback from viewers. Some have demonstrated the influence of transnational circulation of culture in the online space, and successful cases have all grounded creative content production in local cultural and social specificities to achieve resonance with viewers. Moreover, community building is also evidenced in distribution strategy. The success has led online video platforms to incorporate professionalizing amateurs into their plans of boosting original "in-house" content production through coproduction deals. Although this offers further opportunities for entrepreneurial amateurs, the flexible labeling of content and the path to coproduction deals also illustrate the self-interested expediency on the part of online sites, which have developed into hybrids of content producers, platform intermediaries, and ecosystem facilitators.

While professionalizing amateurs navigate the journey of digital entrepreneurship, they are tactfully negotiating the creativity/commerce/community relations in a space heavily influenced by state and corporate power. While the state now perceives the Internet as a frontier of promoting innovation and entrepreneurship, it may turn out to be another site where state co-optation of the emerging form of digital entrepreneurs develops. Indeed, China's ICT entrepreneurs are found to be Janus-faced as they provide social media platforms to increasingly vocal and critical civil society while also aiding in the protection of the party-state (Lagerkvist, 2011). Now that digital entrepreneurship expands to professionalizing amateurs, the attenuation of authority-challenging spoof, and the burgeoning *diaosi* theme, the injection of "positive energy" as well as the adoption of self-censorship reveal entrepreneurial amateurs' compliance to the state's adamant intention to maintain its discursive and ideological control.

This, however, does not indicate a wholesale submission to the authorities; rather, it reflects the challenge of striking a balance between two different tunes. Moreover, the fissures in the copyright governance models in different platforms embody further uncertainties as professionalizing amateurs intend to draw on UGC in their creative production process.

Professionalizing amateurs in the online video space in China as important actors in the rapidly evolving screen ecology illuminate what Guobin Yang (2014) calls the ironies and ambivalence of the Chinese Internet. The emergence and growth of these entrepreneurial amateurs and their coevolution with online video space is a result of the interplay of both local contexts and global influences. They challenge the dichotomies between professional and amateur, public and private ownership, state and public discourse, entire resistance and wholesale submission to the authorities. While there is no crystal ball that allows us a peep into the future, professionalization of amateur practices together with the hopes, frustrations, and uncertainties in the process certainly warrants further research.

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