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“A World of VICE”: The Visceral Economies of VICE’s Media Empire

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Film and Media Studies

by

Nicole Elizabeth Strobel

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ABSTRACT

“A World of VICE”: The Visceral Economies of VICE’s Media Empire

by

Nicole Elizabeth Strobel

“A World of VICE” examines one case study—digital media company VICE Media—as an aperture into analyzing the material and affective politics of 21st century media cultures, industries, and politics. VICE’s visceral, “immersionist” journalistic style, which privileges experiential knowledge and appeals to affective engagement over other more informative approaches, has been cited as its own unique form of innovation in journalism, youth content creation, advertising, and digital business. This dissertation uses VICE as a mode for understanding key changes in the cultural landscapes, industry organizations, and visual ecologies of digital culture. Broadly, I argue that increasingly speculative capitalist practices have facilitated a far-reaching extractive economy geared toward monetizing and enclosing upon affective capacities. I use key moments in VICE’s tumultuous history as a lens for examining the widespread social and economic contradictions that characterize 21st century global politics and culture.

This project builds connections between a rising interest across journalism, information studies, and critical media and communication studies in “the affective politics of digital media” and vital critiques of platform power. It is methodologically informed by what critical cultural studies scholars have called “conjunctural analysis,” in which tracing the always-already contested terrain of a conjuncture involves mapping the connections

between the material and affective dimensions of culture.¹ The first thread—which engages closely with the material dimensions of VICE’s empire-building project—examines shifts in cultural and economic power sparked by the rise of digital technologies, platforms, and industries. The first and second chapter focus on unpacking the spatial and industrial contexts of VICE’s rise, zooming in on the intersections between creative economies and urban renewal (chapter one) and the “messy middle” of digital video economies that gave rise to a viral digital news bubble (chapter two). The second thread examines how these material dimensions inform and are informed by broader changes in the affective landscapes of digital media and digital culture. This thread zooms in on the connections between affective politics and digital culture in journalistic (chapter three) and documentary (chapter four) video cultures, particularly as cultural production becomes increasingly entangled with the commercial and data-driven interests of social media platforms. This dissertation contributes to critical work occurring in contemporary digital media and cultural theory, global media studies, media industries studies, and journalism studies.

¹ Lawrence Grossberg, “Cultural Studies in Search of a Method, or Looking for Conjunctural Analysis,” *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 96–97 (2019): 38–68.

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Introduction

A World of VICE

The first episode of the 2013 premier season of VICE on HBO opened with a montage of explosive images. Short clips filled with explosions, drugs, corpses, guns, and bombs appear and disappear in rapid succession via off-center split-screen frames, edited together in a disorienting and hallucinatory rhythm. Alongside this bombastic display of death and danger, CEO Shane Smith, in his characteristic monotone, delivered this opening monologue: “The world is changing. Now no one knows where it’s going. But we’ll be there uncovering the news, culture, and politics that expose the absurdity of the modern condition. This is the world through our eyes. This is the world of VICE.” While this voiceover introduction was cut from later seasons of (now canceled) VICE on HBO, it serves as a vital frame for VICE Media’s broader ethos and stance, which cuts across its list of media ventures. Taking an “immersionist” approach to visual journalism and popular documentary genres, VICE’s videos imagine a world of vice, promising “news from the edge.” The juxtaposition of highly stylized, kinetic, and provocative visuals with a discursive frame of chaos and absurdity demonstrates the founding motivations for VICE Media’s broader ambitions: to gain access to and visualize “the world” beyond the narrow confines of mainstream cultural production, and to create original content that speaks to the shifting ground of our “modern condition.” In this opening montage, VICE proposes a vision of the modern world that is characterized by two persistent factors: change and vice. These are both rendered visible in kinetic and chaotic forms, through spectacular displays of up-close danger.

Since its debut, VICE's flagship video newsmagazine on HBO has won a number of awards, provoked debate about the future of digital journalism, and acted as the driving force for VICE's expansion from indie magazine to cross-platform, global digital media company with stakes in linear television, feature film production, creative advertising services, global content distribution networks, and events production, including owning its own beer and Shoreditch, London pub. Throughout its history, VICE became synonymous with the cutting-edge; it rose as a site for aspirational young (mostly male) media workers and journalists to pursue new frontiers in journalism and push the boundaries of various genres, ways of reporting, and even styles of work. VICE workers had a penchant for working hard and partying harder, with lavish performances of the company's fortitude including handing out bags of cash at company events, all night parties on the Williamsburg offices' rooftop, and announcements of "world domination." Founder and CEO Shane Smith looked to media moguls like Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch, as well as tech leaders like Mark Zuckerberg and Steve Jobs, as inspiration for his own dreams of a VICE media empire. VICE's business model and company culture was reflective of this transition in power across media industries—VICE's work culture was akin to the early days of beer- and substance-fueled start-ups like Facebook, while its business plan announced VICE's brand as synonymous with the interests of a digital-first generation looking to change the world (despite drawing from older models to build its media business).¹

Across these surfaces, the VICE ethos hinges on the company's promise to imagine a world of VICE. It articulates an image of the world that sees value in attending to liminal subjects and topics that may have fallen out of the risk-averse standards of dominant news

¹ For example, see Adam Fisher, "Sex, Beer, and Coding: Inside Facebook's Wild Early Days in Palo Alto," *Wired*, July 10, 2010.

and media institutions, but also frames these worlds through spectacularized images of the illicit or the taboo (at least by Western standards). Circling back to Smith's monologue, it seems imperative to ask: what does this "world of VICE" look like, and what is new about this "different" and "absurd" world? Chris Ip, writing for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, suggests that VICE's appeal is in part due to its "realistic" aesthetics: "video that appears to be real hits the viewers viscerally, cuts through the noise of the internet, and shares well on social media."² If we follow this logic, VICE's appeal is that, to young people, circulations of videos that hit them "viscerally," move easily through digital channels, and read as "genuine" provide an opening to an alternative sense of presence and geography that promises the authentic (rather than sanitized and manipulated) image of the world. If placed in the context of (tele)visual news, VICE's videos challenge and unravel the "realness" or "liveness" typically ascribed to mainstream or institutionally recognized sources of broadcast and digital video production.

This appeal to viewers' visceral reactions is a subtle, yet calculated move: the visceral news video signals a movement away from journalistic emphases on objectivity, research, and facts-driven reporting. Instead, VICE's promise to be "honestly subjective" through its "immersionist" aesthetic places the VICE reporter's affective experience of various cultures and events at the center of each video. According to Ip, VICE's coverage of the uprisings in Baltimore following the murder of Freddie Gray emphasized affective texture over informational reporting, stating that "we don't learn much new information about the racial dynamics in Baltimore or the consequences of the protests (although some text reports deal with these issues), but we do get a visceral sense of what the place is like. We see the density

² Chris Ip, "The Cult of Vice," *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 2015.

of protesters out on the street, and the double middle fingers they throw at police, the shine of sweat on a 32-year-old Baltimore resident who wants the media to leave, and the silent, intimidating line of riot police with batons and clear shields.”³

VICE’s affective valences demonstrate its connection to the digital, which many critical media scholars have argued is defined by a distinctly affective form of politics. Affect, as defined by Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, is “the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability.”⁴ Many affect theorists are engaged with understanding both the material workings of the body—and how that shifts with new biotechnologies or biometric forms of data capture—and the ways that assumedly neutral biological processes of sensation and non-cognitive behavior are in fact still inherently culturally and socially mediated. In this way, affect theorists with a particular interest in the digital and its increasing reach into simulating cognitive processes via the collections and use of psychological and biometric data attempt to understand the topology of culture and sociality by bridging genealogies of critical theory that attempt to separate a long a set of Cartesian dualisms: mind and body, culture and nature, rational thought and emotion. Breaking from a more subject-driven line of phenomenological thinking on sense and sensation that assumes a cognitive rationality and bodily wholeness, media theorists who utilize the materialist and monadist philosophies of

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 1.

Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, A.N. Whitehead, Simondon, and others emphasize the folding and complex relay systems between non-cognitive forms of sensation and a range of behaviors and beliefs, including emotion and desire.⁵ Their work decenters individualistic understandings of human subjectivity by homing in on intensities, virtualities, potentialities, and relationalities that direct our movements away from or towards others and objects. It also considers how events shape the relationalities between human and non- or more-than-human entities, including the technologies, platforms, and interfaces with which we engage. This results in attending to the ways that the distribution of the sensible, logical, perceivable, and registerable informs our reactions or attachments to other objects, which they argue occurs at a deeper, non- or precognitive level through forms of social habituation and attunement.

“A World of VICE” explores and expands VICE’s material and affective spatial politics, which I find is indicative of a specifically digital shift in the relationship between the real, the authentic, and affective forms of engagement and politics. This visceral, “immersionist” journalistic style, which privileges experiential knowledge and appeals to affective engagement over other more informative approaches, has been cited as its own unique form of innovation in journalism, youth content creation, advertising, and digital business. As VICE has moved into other avenues of production outside of journalistic content—ranging from series featuring drug tourism to documentaries covering Indigenous communities—this immersionist approach cuts across various projects, signaling a demand for experiential and lifestyle content that “appears real” in this way. Yet, affective politics

⁵ See: Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Patricia Clough, *The User Unconscious: On Affect, Media, and Measure* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Tony D. Sampson, *A Sleepwalker’s Guide to Social Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020); Luciana Parisi, *Contagious Architecture Computation, Aesthetics, and Space* (MIT Press, 2013).

and immersionism/immediacy in image cultures have a deeper history in the cultural landscapes and visual ecologies that act to justify the commodification of culture as resource, as I contend with below.⁶ At the heart of these changes is a broader reorganization of media institutions and production cultures at the hands of digital technologies and platforms’ participatory cultures, which has both challenged the hegemonic power and media authority of media conglomerates and has been productive in rerouting the creative energies of “democratized” media production and activism to depend on the extractive practices and opaque algorithmic logics of centralized platform power.

As I detail below, critical media scholarship has linked this lack of regulation and oversight on platforms to the growing “affective politics” of digital culture, specifically when it comes to political media and information.⁷ VICE emerged within this digital “wild West” and utilized the lack of regulatory oversight to “disrupt” established media industries. Across VICE’s affective approach to digital storytelling are complex, emergent economies and cultures around digital video and streaming. Throughout this dissertation, I use video specifically to denote the slippage between news, documentary, and other non-fiction forms that VICE exploits throughout its history. In ways reminiscent of the ambivalent positionalities of tech companies, at some points VICE deflects from the responsibilities of being deemed a source of journalism by differentially positioning itself. At times when their ethics and quality as a news provider are questioned, they deflect by categorizing their videos as documentaries. At other times, they champion their videos as challenging and updating

⁶ George Yudice’s work is significant in this realm, in which he argues that culture practices and performances of cultural difference act as a horizon for capitalist enclosure that incorporates capitalism’s outer margins. George Yudice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁷ Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davies, eds., *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

outdated journalistic norms and agendas. The avoidance of being called a news or media company is common across tech companies that grew out of the unregulated wild West of the early internet;⁸ the proliferation of personal recording devices and editing software has made anyone a documentarian, often in ways that obscure the vexed aesthetics, norms, political investments, and histories of documentary praxis and journalistic ethics.

Across my research chapters, I argue that virality—a speculative form of digital measurement that appears transparent but obscures the mediating role of algorithms and platform power—has come to stand in for “the social” or “the popular.” Virality at once gives users a sense of collective experience, feelings of connection, or hope of equal participation in an increasingly noisy informational context and an often highly individualized or personalized media ecology.⁹ Scholarship about internet virality initially conjured xenophobic discourses about contagion and threats of computer viruses, but morphed during the rise of social media platforms, which celebrated viral politics as a modality for contagious transformative change and democracy, often discussed through the lens of the popular protests of Occupy Wall Street and the uprisings associated with the Arab Spring.¹⁰ Yet, initial enthusiasm and/or ambivalence about viral content—specifically on social media platforms like YouTube—has recently turned pessimistic, focusing on viral circulations of propaganda, fake news, hate speech, and fascism.¹¹ These studies find that

⁸ Philip Napoli and Robyn Caplan, “Why Media Companies Insist They’re Not Media Companies, Why They’re Wrong, and Why It Matters,” *First Monday*, May 2, 2017.

⁹ Sampson finds that similar viral crowds animate both the anxious affects of “terrorist contagion” and the utopian ones that drive “viral love,” as seen in the 2008 Barack Obama presidential campaign. Sampson, *Virality*.

¹⁰ Jussi Parikka, *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses*, Second Edition (Peter Lang, 2016); Patricia Clough and Jasbir K. Puar, “Introduction: The Viral,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 1–2 (2012): 13–26.

¹¹ See: Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davies, eds., *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Jodi Dean, “Affective Networks,” *Media Tropes eJournal* 2, no. 2 (2010): 19–44; Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai, “Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism: Affect, Subjectivity and

there is an underlying affective politics and economics to virality, particularly as the architectures of platforms and the affective forms they value change alongside emergent digital economies and ecologies. From a media perspective, the centrality of virality to ideas of the popular or distributions of value raises vital questions about the forms of content that “go viral,” the relationship between virality and a broader data economy, and the ways that platforms, algorithms, and people shape the possibilities for what can, does, and doesn’t go viral.

In political contexts, virality drives and feeds off of visceral politics, creating what I call an “economics of viscosity.” Building from Achille Mbembe’s explorations of an eschatological “politics of viscosity,” which shapes and is shaped by what Sarah Banet-Weiser has called a broader neoliberal “economics of visibility,” I analyze the rise of visceral aesthetics and their attached visual politics as they appear and circulate across digital platforms.¹² Viscerality, a modality of affect aimed at “the gut” that cuts across the affective registers of both colonial and decolonial regimes, informs the aesthetics I find in VICE’s visceral videos and undergirds today’s political environments and visual landscapes.¹³ I argue that, in an environment of doubt as to what articulations of popular culture are “real” and which are fabricated or “fake,” authenticity and gut-level modes of thinking are what users

Inequality,” *Journal of Communication* 68, no. 2 (April 1, 2018): 318–26; Rebecca Lewis, “Alternative Influence Network: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube,” *Data & Society*, September 18, 2018.

¹² See: Achille Mbembe, “Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Viscerality,” YouTube, Duke Franklin Humanities Institute, 2016; Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Keynote Address: Media, Markets, Gender: Economies of Visibility in a Neoliberal Moment,” *The Communication Review* 18, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 53–70; Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Convergence on the Street: Rethinking the Authentic/Commercial Binary,” *Cultural Studies* 25 (2018): 4–5; Sarah Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

¹³ Following Mbembe’s interest in visceral politics, postcolonial scholarship has also turned to affect and visceral registers as the site through which colonial differences are developed (and can be remade) at the site of encounter. See: Nheetu Khanna, *The Visceral Logics of Decolonization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Purnima Mankekar and Hannah Carlan, “The Remediation of Nationalism: Viscerality, Virality, and Digital Affect,” in *Global Digital Cultures: Perspectives from South Asia*, ed. Aswin Punathambekar and Sriram Mohan (University of Michigan Press, 2019).

reach for to determine their relationship to content circulating online. What's become increasingly clear in studies of digital culture across platforms, genres, and personalities, is that today's media, news, and entertainment culture is driven primarily by desires to quantify and amplify circulating affect, both from the perspective of trying to understand what is true based on an internalized dependence on metrics and from the perspective of advertisers. Mbembe's arguments about the politics of viscosity help us understand this tension: on one end, there is a fight for liberal democracy and social media's ability to facilitate community, identity, and free expression that can lead to revolutionary ideas about better worlds to come; on the other, there is the ever-expanding reach of global finance capital, whose interests are in commodifying and enclosing spaces in ways that act directly against these claims to democratic expression.¹⁴ At the center of this tension is virality, affect, and Mbembe's visceral politics—it is precisely this ambiguous form of mediated intensity that makes extreme videos economically viable and ties political expression to its ability to go viral. Visceral forms of engagement, when tied to shock, disruption, and brand logics, enclose on viewers' affective capacities for the purpose of priming attention while simultaneously laying claim to truth based on the weak connection that virality is democratically determined.

To this end, I map an agenda for contending with the material and affective impacts of virality as a way to interrogate its function as a demarcation of value and as an articulation

¹⁴ Mbembe, "Frantz Fanon." This sentiment is also echoed in more empirically grounded studies of digital politics, such as Merlyna Lim's contention that: "On the one hand, social media provide affordances for civil society groups and activists to communicate and interact with each other, form associational networks, distribute content, and mobilise mass activism. On the other hand, social-media networks are vast, content is over-abundant, attention spans are short, and conversations are parsed into diminutive sentences (Lim 2013, 644). In this milieu, civil society must work against the 'shrinking soundbite' (Lim 2013, 651) and algorithmic biases that privilege simple or simplified and emotion-provoking extreme content (Lim 2020). During this period, civil society activism has worked amid the rise of algorithmic politics, marked by the prevalence of binary populist frameworks and algorithmic enclaves that are largely unfavourable to civic and democratic pursuits." In Merlyna Lim, "From Activist Media to Algorithmic Politics: The Internet, Social Media, and Civil Society in Southeast Asia," in *Routledge Handbook of Civil and Uncivil Society in Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2023): 35.

of the popular. Despite the spectacular nature of VICE's overall oeuvre, the discursive positioning of VICE Media within popular and trade articles animates the significance of exploring the contours of VICE's Media Empire: VICE Media often positions itself as the solution to a number of media industrial concerns around what to do with the digital, and many institutions and critics concede that the company does produce "cutting-edge" material. From CNN to MTV, and from Rupert Murdoch to Intel, a number of media institutions have partnered with VICE Media as a way to engage millennials with original content creation and gain insight on how to reach cord-cutting younger viewers online. These deep connections to tech and media investment contrast VICE's overarching contrarian ethos: in an interview, VICE co-founder Suroosh Alvi described VICE's business model as one built on the tenets of "punk rock capitalism" and Shane Smith has consistently cited VICE as a "changing of the guard" in media while espousing his desires for "world domination."¹⁵ VICE's original entrance into the digital media scene was an extension of its boundary-pushing hipster lifestyle magazine content, which was largely developed and authored by Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes.

It is easy to be dismissive of VICE's exoticizing tendencies and radical posturing. In addition to the various exposes, lawsuits, and scandals around VICE's journalistic ethics that have emerged over the years, the company is also still deeply indebted to both the monopolistic commercial platforms it sometimes critiques (such as Google/YouTube, Facebook, X/Twitter, etc.) and the supposed mainstream institutions it resists via its outsider

¹⁵ "VICE: Suroosh Alvi," NPR, 2016; "'Vice Announces Major Investment Partnerships with MTV Founder Tom Freston, WPP and The Raine Group; The World's Most Successful Media Moguls Align with Upstart Media Empire with the Goal of 'Total World Domination.'," *Business Wire*, April 5, 2011.

brand image.¹⁶ These dependencies are evidenced by the corporation's deep connection to the same monolithic sources of capital it shallowly and rather performatively criticizes, particularly as the company's decision to double down on both social media and linear television for investment and content distribution is both what grew its inflated value and created the conditions for its demise. Yet, the company's global expansion into a number of media markets demands a more flexible and focused examination of how and in what ways VICE inserts itself into broader global media ecosystems, as well as the consequences of its global circulations. To get at the layers that VICE Media operates on requires analysis of not only the digital and physical infrastructures that allow for VICE's videos to circulate globally, but also attention to the theoretical stakes a global media empire of vice implies: an empire built on vice and change resonates with an investment between media and modes of experience, especially as digital networks enable new routes of connection and representation.

By embracing the political ambivalence of brand culture and its twinned normative discourse of "authenticity," VICE Media seems to operate in the space between the commodification of politics as a type of branded identity or lifestyle on the one hand, and on the other, the aspirational, yet highly entrepreneurial and individuated social desires to use media for transformative change.¹⁷ This speaks to the political ambivalences of digital culture, where activist causes and corporate profits now often meet in a highly individualized consumer space. It is not enough to simply celebrate the visibility of difference, as critics of identity politics and multiculturalist projects argue. The recognition and categorization of

¹⁶ Emily Steel, "At Vice, Cutting-Edge Media and Allegations of Old-School Sexual Harassment," *New York Times*, December 23, 2017; Reeves Wiedeman, "Vice Media Was Built on a Bluff. What Happens When It Gets Called?," *New York*, June 10, 2018.

¹⁷ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™*.

diversity, especially when reworked into a sellable product or experience, has a tendency to essentialize, dehistoricize, or otherwise change the lived conditions of marginal lifeworlds for a consuming public, making sites of cultural struggle fit into easily digestible forms ripe for a highly neoliberal consumption of “lifestyle” and “experience.” In this way, “a world of VICE” seems to move in opposite directions: On the one hand, “a world of vice” on a broad scale challenges the stigmatization of liminal lifeworlds by showcasing the often creatively haphazard arrangements people engage in to get by and make do. On the other, in “a world of VICE,” the brand’s penchant for spectacularized displays and “absurd” and chaotic framing package VICE’s exploration of this world as an exoticized, titillating journey into the global underworld. Evacuated of any historical or structural specificity, VICE productions, as they extend from the magazine to VICE’s more recent journalistic endeavors, privilege affecting consumers through packaging alternative experiences to build an authentic brand over elucidating the real “absurdity” of the modern condition: the expansion of precarity and its (equally precarious) neoliberal solutions.

Critical Approaches to Digital Culture

VICE as a company—along with similar companies that emerged within the same time span, including BuzzFeed, Vox, Complex, AJ+, Ozy, Axios, and many more—has been understudied across media-related fields. Many of the studies of VICE that do exist are anchored heavily in journalism studies, which often takes an institutional approach to understanding the innovations and continuities of VICE’s “hybrid,” affective journalism.¹⁸

¹⁸ Henrik Bødker, “Vice Media Inc.: Youth, Lifestyle – and News,” *Journalism* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 27–43; Paul Stringer, “Finding a Place in the Journalistic Field,” *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 13 (October 3, 2018): 1991–2000; Paul Stringer, “Viral Media: Audience Engagement and Editorial Autonomy at BuzzFeed and Vice,” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 15, no. 1 (March 17, 2020); James Dennis and

Tangential studies, such as Edward Hurcombe’s detailed analysis of the phenomenon of “social news,” have worked to identify and define this new news genre, arguing that the rise of viral, infotainment news companies like BuzzFeed in journalistic circles responded to circulating desires for engagement, sociability, and personalization.¹⁹ Similarly, the handful of scholarly characterizations of VICE Media’s journalistic productions also emphasizes the youthful and experiential nature of VICE’s brand of digital storytelling. Henrik Bodker argues that VICE Media’s blending of lifestyle and news content, both in their company holdings and in their approach to print and video journalism, reveals a broader blurring of generic boundaries within emergent media companies.²⁰ Bodker also gestures toward VICE Media’s particular blending of amateur aesthetics and on-the-ground reporting that flaunts transgressions of industry protocols as a type of digital news hybridity emblematic of new, digitally-inflected journalism practices.²¹ This hybridity is also part of a broader journalistic movement toward what Zizi Papacharissi has called “affective streams of news,” driven by shifting technologies and modes of production and distribution.²²

These critical interrogations provide valuable insights into the ways journalism and journalistic work as a field have changed, shifted, and often also remained the same in

Susana Sampaio-Dias, “‘Tell the Story as You’d Tell It to Your Friends in a Pub’: Emotional Storytelling in Election Reporting by BuzzFeed News and Vice News,” *Journalism Studies* 22, no. 12 (September 10, 2021): 1608–26; Nikki Usher, “Venture-Backed News Startups and the Field of Journalism,” *Digital Journalism* 5, no. 9 (October 21, 2017): 1116–33; Lucy Kung, *Innovators in Digital News* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2015).

¹⁹ Edward Hurcombe, *Social News: How Born-Digital Outlets Transformed Journalism* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022); Edward Hurcombe, Jean Burgess, and Stephen Harrington, “What’s Newsworthy About ‘Social News’? Characteristics and Potential of an Emerging Genre,” *Journalism* 22, no. 2 (2021): 378–94.

²⁰ Bodker, “Vice Media Inc.”

²¹ Ibid.

²² Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Zizi Papacharissi, “Toward New Journalism(s): Affective News, Hybridity, and Liminal Spaces,” *Journalism Studies* 16, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 27–40.

response to the “platformization” of news distribution, production, and funding models.²³

Yet, as I argue in chapter two, this approach severs the connections between these companies’ entrance into the news field and the industrial context that sparked their interest in news and shaped their broader aspirations and business models. My research challenges these insights by taking VICE out of the context of journalism alone, pursuing a cross-disciplinary approach in order to grapple with the complexities of digital economies and cultures. While VICE’s (and others’) development of news divisions as brand-building products can be placed into a longer history of journalism’s cannibalization by entertainment industries and faltering funding structures, it also reveals the ways that affective storytelling about global news and culture content acted as a lucrative business for digital media brands. Instead of simply placing VICE Media’s news content within a history of journalistic institutions and creeping forms of commodification that shape the dynamics of news genres, I instead claim that VICE Media’s forays into investigative reporting from 2006-2018 reflect shifting dynamics within digital content networks as social media platforms have centralized their distributional power, specifically in the realm of digital video.

This project is methodologically informed by what critical cultural studies have called “conjunctural analysis,” in which tracing the always-already contested terrain of a conjuncture involves mapping the connections between the material and affective dimensions of culture.²⁴ The first thread—which engages closely with the material dimensions of VICE’s empire-building project—examines the shifts in cultural and economic power in what many

²³ David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (November 1, 2018): 4275–92; Thomas Poell, “Three Challenges for Media Studies in the Age of Platforms,” *Television & New Media* 21, no. 6 (September 1, 2020): 650–57; Thomas Poell, David B. Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy, “Spaces of Negotiation: Analyzing Platform Power in the News Industry,” *Digital Journalism*, August 16, 2022, 1–19.

²⁴ Lawrence Grossberg, “Cultural Studies in Search of a Method, or Looking for Conjunctural Analysis,” *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* 96–97 (2019): 38–68.

media scholars have called “convergence culture.”²⁵ While convergence culture investigated the potentialities and industrial crises produced by the rise of amateur or DIY productions, recent scholarship has shifted focus to mapping the ways that a rising entrepreneurial creator culture is deeply tied to the speculative and opaque commercial interests of digital platform companies. As David Cunningham and Stuart Craig argue, this new screen ecology that works in between the “established” players of Hollywood and the “disruptive” capacities of Silicon Valley has produced “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.”²⁶ As platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter, Google, YouTube, and more rose in popularity, entire industries and business models were destabilized in the process. VICE’s own media ventures—ranging from its in-house creative services to its flagship news division and linear television channel—took shape in the deregulated spaces of digital economies and cultures as they began to challenge the dominant cultural, political, and economic power of hulking media conglomerates.

The second thread examines how these material dimensions inform and are informed by broader changes in the affective landscapes of digital media and digital culture. This thread zooms in on the connections between affective politics and digital culture, particularly as cultural production becomes increasingly entangled with the commercial and data-driven interests of social media platforms.²⁷ Whereas social media platforms like Facebook/Meta,

²⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

²⁶ Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

²⁷ The affective turn and its relationship to the digital has spanned many disciplines, as evidenced by recent edited collections dedicated to interdisciplinary inquiries into algorithms, affect, and political organizing such as Bolter and Davies, *The Affective Politics of Digital Media*.

YouTube/Google, Twitter/X, and others were once imagined as tools for facilitating new modes of community and have been central to various activist and political organizations across the 2000's, the fallout of the 2016 US election and rising waves of populist nationalisms, misinformation campaigns, and digital insurgency globally have shifted scholarship towards examining the ways that commercial algorithms perpetuate offline biases and stoke affective publics for capitalist profit.

At the center of these conversations about the affective nature of politics today are social media platforms and digital communication infrastructures. As Jean-Christophe Plantin and others have argued, digital platforms like Facebook and Google often act as communication infrastructures, thereby “platformizing” infrastructures in the process.²⁸ For example, the proliferation of smartphones globally has allowed more people to access the internet via mobile apps, particularly social media and messaging platforms. In many parts of the world, Facebook is synonymous with the internet; meanwhile Facebook notoriously shirks its regulatory and mediating power in these circumstances, preferring to differentially define itself as a “neutral” platform and “not a media company” when faced with threats of governmental oversight and regulation.²⁹ The infrastructuralization of tech platforms has inspired cross-disciplinary efforts to interrogate platform power and the externalities of “platformization,” which Thomas Poell, David N. Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy describe as the “penetration of digital platforms’ economic, infrastructural, and governmental extensions into the cultural industries, as well as the organization of cultural practices of labor, creativity, and democracy around these platforms.”³⁰

²⁸ Jean-Christophe Plantin et al., “Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 1 (2018): 293–310.

²⁹ Napoli and Caplan, “Why Tech Companies Insist.”

³⁰ Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy, “Spaces of Negotiation.”

This project builds connections between a rising interest across journalism, information studies, and critical media and communication studies in “the affective politics of digital media” and vital critiques of platform power. I place affect theory in conversation with materially oriented industry and historiographical research in order to parse the material and affective functions of viral video culture. In this case, VICE Media acts as a central grounding point for this effort; to demonstrate the connections and disjunctures between the material and affective dimensions of 21st century digital cultures, I use key moments in VICE’s tumultuous history as a lens for examining the widespread social and economic contradictions that characterize millennial politics and culture. This perspective contributes to critical work occurring in contemporary digital media and cultural theory, global media studies, media industries studies, and journalism studies, as I outline in the following section. Broadly, my dissertation argues that increasingly speculative capitalist practices have facilitated a far-reaching extractive economy geared toward monetizing and enclosing upon affective capacities. More specifically, I argue that the industries, cultures, and textual forms that surround digital news and non-fiction media are beholden to the commercially driven data practices, histories of visual cultures and representational politics, and the informal and toxic work cultures of social media platforms. I find that the informality and opacity of digital culture and industries has driven a distinctly affective turn in digital journalism and non-fiction storytelling that adopts the ambivalent affective politics of a broader neoliberal brand culture and sharing economy.

To pursue this project, my methods are equally as interdisciplinary, cutting across critical historiographical work, comparative industry studies, and close textual analysis. My first chapter uses archival evidence, including self-gathered archives of *Vice* magazine issues

and company history and cultural geographical studies to track changes in Brooklyn's landscapes, architecture, and infrastructures. My second chapter details a "crisis historiography" of digital video economies, using critical historiographies of internet television and early video cultures, popular and trade press coverage of VICE's various industrial positionings, and insights from a self-built archive of insider "industry texts," archived web pages, social media posts from former VICE employees, and published memoirs from key players. My third chapter skews more theoretical, and I draw from a diverse range of voices within digitally focused cultural theory. Specifically, I bring decolonial and postcolonial theories to bear on contemporary digital media theories on affect, politics, and virality in order to understand the broader cultural dynamics and predecessors of these visual forms and media logics. I do so through a close reading of one viral VICE video and one viral ISIS video, as well as various texts contextualizing their cultural impacts. My final chapter brings all of these threads and methods together to examine how and why Vice resonates in different global locations, focusing on two case studies in Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. Moving out of the space of news and into documentary, I closely analyze a body of VICE documentaries made specifically for global audiences in order to analyze their relationships to deeper histories of postcolonial visualities, the proliferation of documentary images and, the role of virality as a biopolitical force in broader political struggles and articulations of the global (as it is and as many dream it to be).

Contesting Platform Power: Interdisciplinary Industry Studies

As a company that, while invested in news production, functions as a multimedia content production house, technological development space (such as developing proprietary

content management systems), advertising firm, and even distribution hub, VICE's media empire spans multiple overlapping fields. This amalgamation of industries and fields under one roof gestures toward the complexity of studying contemporary media industries, particularly as they converge and reshape themselves in response to the complexities of media power in a globally connected media ecology. Taking on Niell, Poeberg, and Duffy's call for more interdisciplinary connective work that connects journalism studies to media studies by way of platform studies, business studies, media industry studies, science and technology studies, and infrastructure studies, I parse VICE's videos and various industrial repositionings as they move between the converged spaces of journalism, documentary, advertising, tech companies, and entertainment industries.³¹

The rise of what Stuart Cunningham, David Craig, and Jon Silver have described as "the new screen ecology" has reshaped aspects of 21st century media industries, including the production cultures, spatial politics, distribution pathways, and metrics that attach to digital-first media companies like VICE.³² This shift—which both creates space for emergent individual creators and relies upon older industrial models—is central to the critical historiographies I outline in chapters one and two. In these two chapters, I build the case for VICE as an important (yet overlooked) piece in media industry analysis. As discussed above, VICE is often studied academically either for its imbrications with the so-called hipster subculture via VICE magazine or as source of "hybrid news," "news innovation," part of a broader move to "social news," or as a "for profit news start-up." VICE has thus been studied through the lenses of journalism studies and subcultural theory, but not as a digital media

³¹ Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy, "Spaces of Negotiation."

³² Stuart Cunningham, David Craig, and Jon Silver, "YouTube, Multichannel Networks and the Accelerated Evolution of the New Screen Ecology," *Convergence* 22, no. 4 (2016): 376–91.

company at the center of disputes over the future of media, new modes of creative cultures, and platform power, particularly when it comes to digital video.

The 2010's was notably plagued by various crises in media power, authority, trust, truth, and facts. Culturally, this has been discussed as a great polarization driven by bad faith microcelebrities, problematic algorithms, and the circulations of rage, fear, and mistrust spurred into action by ideas like fake news (and who uses this label matters), alternative facts, and conspiratorial publics.³³ Academically, the fervor over the revolutionary potentials of social media has died down, shifting gears to begin interrogating the terrain of cultural production that has assisted the coherence of a variety of counterhegemonic publics, from the uprisings of Tahrir Square and Occupy Wall Street to the reckonings of police brutality, white supremacy, and gendered discrimination and coercion that attached to visible hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, to the angst-ridden circulations of virulent fear and aggression making the rounds in what Rebecca Lewis has described as “the Alternative Influence Network” of white supremacist, ultra-conservative, and misogynist microcelebrities, who spin their opinions as alternative news.³⁴ The new screen ecology—and the constantly shifting dynamics of creative labor attached to these emergent spaces—cuts across a wide swath of industries in a context in which the differences between film,

³³ Rebecca Lewis' work provides great insight into how networks of “alternative influence” solidify their power on spaces like YouTube, which generally involves using the practices of “microcelebrity,” branding, and contrarian discursive appeals to build a following. See: Rebecca Lewis, “Alternative Influence Network: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube,” *Data & Society*, September 18, 2018; Rebecca Lewis, “‘This Is What the News Won’t Show You’: YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-Celebrity,” *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 201–17.

³⁴ Ibid. There also remains a vital interest in tracking what social media activism (and its viral economies) can do for social justice awareness. These include exemplary works like: Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (MIT Press, 2020); Allissa V. Richardson, *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New #Protest Journalism* (Oxford University Press, 2020); and Ruha Benjamin, *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

television, news, and activism blur on social media platforms that treat all media texts as “content.”

The way that aspects of creative work, distribution platforms, and media infrastructures have changed in response to the rapid advancement of digital media and the proliferation of algorithms and data in the media industries have reshaped power dynamics across a number of fields. Reflecting on a decade of media industries research, Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren find that across media industries subfields, industry research is contending with the way that “the prior optimism regarding the possibilities of digital distribution and participatory culture has largely been replaced by a far more somber recognition of the harsh realities of the contemporary digital ecosystem.”³⁵ My research focuses in on this transition by first, tracing the fluctuations and material impacts of the creative economy as it has morphed from DIY, early internet productions by side-hustling, broke artists to the new aspirational horizon for creative work and “authentic” lifestyles. Here, I draw on a range of scholarship contending with the rise of entrepreneurial creative labor, centering cultural studies works on the “new economy,” such as those by Andrew Ross, David Hesmondhalgh, Angela McRobbie, Michael Curtin, and others.³⁶ I find that part of VICE’s particular industrial draw was its timeliness within this atmosphere of emergent alternative networks brought about by consumers’ increasing access to the means of digital video production and distribution. Coming alongside a renewed interest in participatory power and alternative

³⁵ Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, “Media Industries: A Decade in Review,” in Mark Deuze and Mirjam Prenger, eds., *Making Media: Production, Practices, and Professions* (Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 31–44.

³⁶ Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 5th ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2019); Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Cultural Industries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016); Michael Curtin, “Media Capital: Toward the Study of Spatial Flows,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2003): 202–28; Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, eds., *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

networks that characterized the mid-2000's, VICE Media crafted a brand image that drew on the aspirational valences of early internet creative culture and work.

Attending to the convergent industrial contexts embedded in VICE's rise in visibility requires not just a study of its creative production cultures, but also what types of infrastructures, platforms, and other modes of distribution shape its content and positioning. Critical media industry scholarship has long called for research that explores the complexities and connectivities of media economies, such as Jennifer Holt, Gregory Steirer, and Karen Petruska's approach to industry reorganizations that emphasizes "connected viewing."³⁷ This aligns with more recent scholarship from communication and journalism studies, which consistently echoes the need for more interdisciplinary research to better understand the centralizing power of digital platforms across various media industries (and cultural production writ large).³⁸ Contending with converging platforms and new modes of distribution have extended these questions about labor, connection, and possibility to consider not only how media are produced, but also how things move and circulate. My work zooms in on industry-focused scholarship that contends with the rise of digital video, particularly as audiovisual content and production cultures emerge outside of (but always in relation to) the traditional screen industries. For example, scholars like Patrick Vonderau, Ramon Lobato, and Stuart Cunningham and Jon Silver have interrogated the false promises, or perhaps utopic myths, that surround YouTube as an alternative distribution platform for

³⁷ They write that connected viewing proposes a "commitment to complexity, and its insistence upon examining together actors and processes normally studied separately, constitutes not only a broadening of our object of study but also a broadening of the means by which we study it." Jennifer Holt, Gregory Steirer, and Karen Petruska, "Introduction: The Expanding Landscape of Connected Viewing," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 22, no. 4 (2016): 341–47.

³⁸ Nieborg and Poell, "The Platformization of Cultural Production."

amateur video production.³⁹ While writing about the now defunct “multichannel network” model on spaces like YouTube, these authors describe how a myopic focus on how digital platforms “revolutionize” media production for the everyday user actually obscures the continued connections between concentrated media industries and networks. Paying special attention to YouTube and the rise of multi-channel networks within the formation of these alternative digital networks, these authors highlight how they developed in partnership with, and somewhat to the benefit of, media empires despite myths of their production of new possibilities.

Pursuing an interdisciplinary approach to media industries studies that historicizes and contextualizes a liminal object like VICE allows me to demonstrate how the convergence between digital and entertainment industries paved the way for platforms’ centralization, creating an investment bubble that solidified problematic dependencies that have had detrimental effects on an even more precarious journalism industry. My research in these two tangential parts of “new” media economies and cultures—creative work and capital and critical industry analysis—adds to histories of digital industrial change by correlating significant events across different parts of the media industry, thereby painting a more complex picture of industrial-cultural power, platform politics, and the concentration of vital resources to new media endeavors. It is my hope that within my situated analyses of the spatial politics, underlying cultural infrastructures, and shifting industrial networks and hierarchies demonstrates the reasons why tech companies can and should be viewed as media

³⁹ Stuart Cunningham, David Craig, and Jon Silver, “YouTube, Multichannel Networks and the Accelerated Evolution of the New Screen Ecology,” *Convergence* 22, no. 4 (August 1, 2016): 376–91; Ramon Lobato, “The Cultural Logic of Digital Intermediaries: YouTube Multichannel Networks,” *Convergence* 22, no. 4 (August 1, 2016): 348–60; Patrick Vonderau, “The Video Bubble: Multichannel Networks and the Transformation of YouTube,” *Convergence* 22, no. 4 (August 1, 2016): 361–75.

companies. While I center my focus on VICE's imbrications within urban digital creative cultures/frontier cultures and crises in distribution and methods at the hands of streaming video investment bubbles, technology companies play a central role in these broader infrastructural and industrial changes. The historiographical work of chapters one and two are not invested in drawing clean breaks from the deeper histories of gentrification and media power (respectively), but rather aim to demonstrate the ways that the entrance of the highly speculative models of technology companies have accelerated the extractive and precarious dynamics embedded in their predecessors.

Affective Politics + Digital Culture

Alongside these spatial and industrial reorganizations, the era of citizen journalism and blogging has given way to a proliferation of documentary devices and distribution platforms where people can increasingly contest mainstream networks of media power by recording, livestreaming, uploading, or sharing personally documented information that challenges accepted narratives, which has fed into a burgeoning industry for challenging the so-called mainstream. These places, which can be considered both empowering for those marginalized from dominant news or cultural spaces and indoctrinating for those who perceive themselves as persecuted or jaded from changing social norms, appeal specifically to the personal, building connected networks of content and commentary on a wide range of topics, from the political to the more innocuous. In a world filled with information, entertainment, and content overload, VICE's series of news and conflict coverage (that I argue blurs lines between commercial documentary and investigative reporting) purports to be "the definitive guide to an uncertain world" by taking viewers into the headline stories

impacting global politics and culture. What surfaces as VICE's self- and industry-proclaimed value for journalistic content today is that VICE videos convey the *feeling* of global events and appeal to the affective capacities of viewers, doubling down on affects or atmospheres that are notably intensive.

Affect has been mobilized to describe various “turns” in digital media and culture. Most importantly, affect intersects with broader concerns about the mediating role of commercial algorithms, which are notoriously opaque and invite the circulation of intensive feelings in order to capture increasingly finite data from users. Across journalism studies, digital theories, media studies, and both qualitative and quantitative communication studies, scholars and journalists have identified a trend in which digital platforms race to map and monetize affect as part of their broader data mining practices and attention economies of digital platforms. Thinking at a broader scale, critical AI scholars Kate Crawford and Vladen Joler find that “the process of quantification is reaching into the human affective, cognitive, and physical worlds.”⁴⁰ They argue that “every form of biodata – including forensic, biometric, sociometric, and psychometric – are being captured and logged into databases for AI training” as a further iteration of global tech capitalism's extractive economies and incursions into our ways of being as they search for ways to capture, monetize, prime, and direct user engagement. Building on this categorization, Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis' collection, *The Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means*, places tech

⁴⁰ Kate and Vladen Joler Crawford, “Anatomy of an AI System,” *Anatomy of an AI System*, accessed November 14, 2023, <http://www.anatomyof.ai>. Merlyna Lim and Adi Kuntsman have also both argued that affect acts as the currency in our times, which is stoked by the affective investments of commercial algorithms. See: Lim Merlyna, “Algorithmic Enclaves: Affective Politics and Algorithms in the Neoliberal Social Media Landscape,” in *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means*, ed. Megan Boler M and Elizabeth Davies (New York: Routledge, 2021); Adi Kuntsman, “Reverberation, Affect, and Digital Politics of Responsibility,” in Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davies, eds., *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

companies, advertisers, and right-wing media ecosystems at the heart of driving an affect-driven media ecology and mode of politics.⁴¹ Through discussions of the growing attention economy and the impact of neoliberal politics in what Jodi Dean calls “communicative capitalism,” Boler and Davies argue that affect and emotion act as “one of the central engines driving media and politics in the digital age.”⁴²

This lens of affective media as a digitally invasive mode of technologized propaganda and weaponization takes on a somewhat technologically determinist stance, blaming social media platforms and a litany of bad actors, ranging from terrorist groups like ISIS to white supremacist organizations, for indoctrination and manipulation. As I unpack in chapter three, I disagree with these positions, arguing instead that the mediations that occur within and across what Zizi Papacharissi calls “affective publics” reverberate between online and offline political affective landscapes.⁴³ In this sense, I find Papacharissi’s close development of affective publics helpful, in which she argues that the architectures of particular social media platforms inform the soft structures of storytelling that emerge out of the interactions between users, communities, and the platform’s embedded architecture. I also draw strength from Merlyna Lim’s concept of “algorithmic enclaves,” which points out the fallacies of concepts like algorithmically mediated “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers.”⁴⁴ She finds that people self-select into “algorithmic enclaves,” in which “human users and algorithms mutually shape and reshape each other in the sorting, classifying, and hierarchizing of individuals and contents, notably based on affect, and, therefore, they collectively shape the

⁴¹ Boler and Davies, *Affective Politics of Digital Media*.

⁴² Dean, “Affective Networks.”

⁴³ Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*.

⁴⁴ Lim, “Algorithmic Enclaves.”

formation of [these] enclaves and the discourses that takes place within [them].”⁴⁵ In other words, surfacing of extreme or divisive content on platforms like YouTube is the product of both algorithmic forms of engagement (and their focus on forms of content monetization) and the tastes or interests of users.

These latter approaches center the complex relations that create the affective landscapes of digital cultures, refusing to assign too much power to individual “bad actors” (which negates the impact of algorithmic design) or to the manipulative powers of social media platforms (which negates user agency). Digital economies and cultures—specifically on social media platforms in this research—are thus inherently affective, tied to commercial platform architectures and opaque algorithms, embedded in imperatives for increasingly granular data capture, and shaped by the performances of politics which hinge on producing visibility-power through virality. As Lim argues, “in a neoliberal social media landscape, affect is *the currency*, representing a medium of exchange or an intermediary instrument used to facilitate human transactions, between individuals and groups.”⁴⁶

Approaching the affective politics of digital media through the lenses of complex relations and affect as currency—as capital—leads me to adopting what Adi Kuntsman has described as a reverberatory approach to studying affect and media.⁴⁷ Borrowing reverberation from its development in sound studies, she finds that reverberation “challenges the assumption that online communication and its impact on our feelings worked universally and in one predetermined direction” by allowing room to contend with “the movements of feelings around various affective regimes and conventions, and in and out of digital

⁴⁵ Ibid., 195.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 187. See also Kunstman, “Reverberation, Affect”; Crawford and Joler, “Anatomy of an AI System.”

⁴⁷ Kuntsman, “Reverberation, Affect.”

domains.”⁴⁸ Kuntsman is particularly interested in the ways the visual shapes the digital’s affective fabrics, and reverberation allows her to think through the ways certain images and affective regimes, in Sara Ahmed’s terms, gain symbolic “stickiness” through their contextual circulations—their reverberations—which may change and shift over time and across differing contexts.⁴⁹ Kuntsman presents affect as endemic both to the monetary interests of digital platform corporations as well as to the ways complicated affective publics circulate and take shape on and across various networked communities. Thus, it is most often visual forms that ring most affectively intense—whether that intensity translates to fear, hope, love, or hate—that coheres affective publics and informs the visual politics of digital cultures and political movements. This can be celebrated as the democratization of a globally networked kaleidoscope of global visual cultures, but in the background of these circulating affective intensities is the quantification of users’ affective capacities—what Kuntsman calls the “digital manifestations of emotion”—which serve as “one of the key currencies trafficked by social media and big data corporations: mined, sold and bought, and also, increasingly, militarized.”⁵⁰

Tracing the reverberations between online virality, offline political affects, and visual forms defines the critical frames of chapters three and four. Instead of seeing affect as something that can be effectively gamed or “weaponized” by groups like VICE or ISIS, I propose that the affective coherence around visceral aesthetics defined the virality of both ISIS’s shocking, gruesome (but viral) videos in 2014 and VICE’s boundary-pushing, “immersionist” embedded reporting on the group. This frame allows me to also connect this

⁴⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁹ Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (June 2004): 117–139.

⁵⁰ Kuntsman, “Reverberation, Affect,” 70.

conversation to a broader “politics of viscosity” identified by Achille Mbembe’s rereading of Fanonian postcolonial politics. Building on this frame, the final chapter turns to considering regimes of postcolonial visualities in the context of a digitally mediated visceral politics to better understand global circulations of documentary images and self-documentary practices steeped in affective appeal and viral aspirations. In this final chapter, I read affect into Rey Chow’s proposal of “an economy of visibilities,” in which images accrue value via their quantified levels of affectivity by way of the opaque metrics of virality.⁵¹ This links my interest in the affective politics of digital culture to broader histories of postcolonial visualities, which informs my third focus of contending with mediations of the global.

Mediations of the Global

VICE’s media empire conjures older canonical scholarship on the imbrications between space, power, and media, which connects media to imperial efforts to expand cultural soft power into various parts of the world, often resulting in fears about a homogenizing global media system that transmits the ideologies of US imperialism and capitalism. Fittingly, the founders of companies like VICE and BuzzFeed aspired to become the next media moguls of the digital age, often citing the media empires built by Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch and their global expansions of satellite and cable television networks as models for their ultimate goals, albeit accomplished within digital spaces with endless growth potential.

Yet, VICE’s recent bankruptcy proceedings demonstrates that their global expansions were less a mark of the company’s vitality and rather one built on what Anna Tsing has

⁵¹ Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture* (Duke University Press, 2012).

called “spectacular accumulation” in a broader economy of appearances.⁵² In developing this concept, Tsing challenges the “evolutionary assumptions” that undergird totalizing theories like David Harvey’s by showing the imaginative work of conjuring value in a global economy characterized by financialization and speculation. According to Tsing, “[s]pectacular accumulation occurs when investors speculate on a product that may or may not exist. Investors are looking for the appearance of success.”⁵³ Drawing on Tsing’s arguments, Michael Curtin has detailed the scalar, spatial, cultural, and political economic complexities that characterize global media industries in the twenty-first century.⁵⁴ He argues that “we are now seeing the ways in which media worlds emerge, scale, and diminish in response to a relentless tug of actors and forces,” drawing on Bhaskar Sarkar’s articulation of the “plasticity of the global” to characterize the complex maneuvers, scales, and scapes at which “global media” and “globalization” function today.⁵⁵

Although attending to distinct vantage points about globalization, Tsing, Curtin, and Sarkar articulate the complexities of our global media and their imbrications with aesthetics, geographies, and mercurial industries in an age when financialization and speculation govern various distributions of cultural and economic value—capital. The plasticity of the global with its ability to reshape and rescale to various spaces cuts across the two foci I pursue in terms of VICE and its articulations of space.

First, I am interested in the material implications of new media industries and ecologies, thinking not only about how new forms of connection lead to different imaginings

⁵² Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁴ Michael Curtin, “Post Americana: Twenty-First Century Media Globalization,” *Media Industries Journal* 7, no. 1 (2020).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Bhaskar Sarkar, “Plasticity and the Global,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 56, no. 2 (2015): 451-471.

and possibilities of the global, but also about how the rise of what Michael Curtin calls global media capitals necessarily complicates what we mean when we discuss “global media.”⁵⁶ Media capitals contribute to the plurality of voices present within various local, national, regional, and global media systems, creating new formations of transnational and regional power, as well as challenging old claims of Western media imperialism. Yet, the technologization of often urban spaces necessitated by increased media production changes the environment of these spaces physically, aesthetically, and experientially. As these centers of production become more connected, both technologically and in the communication sense, media capitals reshape their surfaces to fit a more cosmopolitan, dematerialized imaginary to attract capital investment, often at the cost of those who fall outside or get in the way of this spatial re-articulation.

Not only are more urban centers becoming mediatized, impacting infrastructural geographies of connection, but the investment in, or alignment between, digital media and speculative capital has changed the physical and cultural composition of post-industrial spaces.⁵⁷ Technologized, creative cities require increased resource extraction from the often poorer and less connected localities of the global, thereby fueling capital accumulation through the dispossession of various communities. Creative capital is driven by various dispossessions—both displacing people within urban spaces they can no longer afford due to speculative real estate, and continuing to impact communities whose land is ruined by conflict or contamination by intensified extraction. These dynamics suggest that media are deeply imbricated in the uneven distributions of capital and space; Tsing’s frictions and

⁵⁶ Michael Curtin, “Media Capital: Toward the Study of Spatial Flows,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2003): 202–28.

⁵⁷ See, for example: Gill and Kanai, “Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism.”

Chow's entanglements gesture toward the persistent and complex organizations of culture, capital, and space in a "globalized" world. Rather than approaches that forefront the homogenization of global media and culture, global media studies today centers complexity and contextuality in order to assess the various connections, disconnections, and emergent power constellations that morph and shift in response to changes in local, national, regional, and global alliances and divisions.

Second, I am interested in the aesthetics and visualities that attach to articulations of the global, particularly as they map onto conversations about global politics and post- and decolonial visualities.⁵⁸ A political economic reading would characterize VICE's global mediations as part of a broader project to scale rapidly enough to soothe investors' anxieties about VICE's profitability. Yet, as many postcolonial and decolonial scholars argue, a political economic view alone does not account for the textual resonances, discordances, or ambivalent identifications that make a particular media object or industry take root. In chapters three and four, I utilize a range of post- and decolonial scholarship to investigate VICE's visceral aesthetics in order to assess what kinds of globalities are visibilized via its videos on various global cultures and political events and its nascent productions across various regional and national contexts.⁵⁹ While attending to the material and political economic dimensions outlined above and within the cases I analyze below, these chapters take a more speculative approach by exploring: what does encountering a world of VICE through acts of spectacular documentary suggest about the global proliferation of

⁵⁸ See: Mbembe, "The Politics of Viscerality"; Khanna, *The Visceral Logics of Decolonization*; Macarena Gomez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Submerged Perspectives* (Duke University Press: 2017).

⁵⁹ I also draw on feminist postcolonial documentary scholarship, such as Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear, and the Lure of Authenticity," in Trinh T. Min-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (Routledge, 1991); Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Duke University Press, 2017); Fatimah Tobing Rony, *How Do We Look?: Resisting Visual Biopolitics* (Duke University Press, 2022).

documentary images via social media and its intersection with articulations of the differing globalities?

VICE's imbrication with the global on both material and symbolic levels drives my engagement with the intricacies of global media studies in a digital context. On the one hand, VICE's media empire represents an extension of an older model of extraction and domination; on the other (as I detail in chapter four), closer analysis of its functionings in different locales suggests a need for more nuance and complexity—what is the role of media and visibility in the increasingly visceral geopolitical atmospheres that cohere and bleed in and out from offline mobilizations? This field informs the research performed in chapter four, as well as acts as a key theoretical backdrop for the more focused attention to visceral politics and virality in chapter three.

Chapter Breakdown

From irreverent hipster magazine to bullheaded journalistic juggernaut to far-reaching lifestyle media brand, my chapters use VICE Media as a way to anchor an interdisciplinary analysis of contemporary speculative capitalism. Taking inspiration from Anna Tsing's provocation to attend to the scale-making projects in a broader economy of spectacular performances and speculative investment bubbles (what she calls the "economy of appearances"), I adopt a scalar approach to VICE's media empire.

I begin by examining articulations of "the local" by tracing VICE's complicity in cultural histories of gentrification on the Brooklyn waterfront. In this chapter, I argue that the unregulated and informal environments of early internet creative culture crystallized into the unsustainable and socially unjust practices that plague digital media and news companies—

as well as their impacts on urban development—today. These new cultural practices surrounding “new” (read, entrepreneurial, piecemeal, or DIY) media work have facilitated a broader reorientation of cities and their media production cultures toward a repurposed aestheticization of their manufacturing pasts that eventually paved the way for speculative capital investment and development. To this end, I explore the changes in creative work, or what Susan Christopherson calls the “new geographies of work,” that cohere around urban downtowns and inform widespread moves to embrace a more precarious and speculative relationship to work and space.⁶⁰ Drawing on various sociological inquiries into creative culture and their intersections with scholarship on new urban frontiers, I explore the ideas of “new media capital” and creative capital through their imbrications with new urban development projects that center authenticity discourses and the neoliberal valences of brand culture in order to attract creative workers and investment capital. I argue that, for the creative capital model/creative mode of production, locality is something to be conjured and projected, and determined by a broader market hungry for cultural value. Interpretations of a place’s past by newcomers or external marketers with an eye for what attracts people to a destination become more valuable precisely because they remake urban space for broader, more affluent publics. These determinations of authenticity differ distinctly from articulations of locality that are forged from the diverse forms of urban community places like Brooklyn used to proudly boast.

In the next chapter, I analyze VICE Media’s broader industry positioning as the company transitioned from hipster magazine to award-winning journalistic source. In this chapter, I locate the rise of digital media companies like VICE, BuzzFeed, Vox, etc. as the

⁶⁰ Susan Christopherson, “Project Work in Context: Regulatory Change and the New Geography of Media,” *Environment and Planning A* 34, no. 11 (2002): 2003–15.

future of journalism as a response to a broader crisis point for a wide swath of media industries. Tracing VICE's participation in an investment bubble in "social news," I argue that the decisions informing VICE's meteoric rise from indie magazine to billion-dollar digital news innovator illustrates a broader crisis in media authority and control, including debates about journalistic authority, digital audience metrics and distribution strategies, and the future television and journalism industries in a digital-first world. Working in between histories of journalistic decline, (false) rhetoric about YouTube's user empowerment, and the crisis-driven moves of media conglomerates looking to regain control and power, I argue that various destabilizations in the market around digital video streaming and content created a bubble that led to the rise and overvaluation of companies like VICE. This chapter adds to scholarship investigating the effects of platformization across news and entertainment industries. I compile and analyze coverage of VICE and other digital start-ups in the popular and trade presses from 2012-2018 in order to paint a "crisis historiography" of the messy era during which VICE—alongside key video distribution platforms like YouTube—came to power. I argue that digital media start-ups lead the industry toward dependencies on digital distribution, drove a rise in metrics-driven journalism, and formalized a market for boundary-pushing journalism that goes viral.

While chapter two looks closely at the industrial impact of virality-driven journalism crafted by born-digital media companies like VICE and BuzzFeed, chapters three and four investigate the emergence of a visceral politics mediated by the internalization of commercially mediated visibility politics. These first two chapters provide a contextual backdrop for my third and most theoretical chapter, in which I propose that digital video ecologies and economies are tied to broader extractive moves to monetize and enclose affect

by amplifying and circulating content aimed at the gut. I do so through a close analysis of Vice Media's "The Islamic State" and its videographic similarities with ISIS's "The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV," each of which went viral at roughly the same time in 2014. I argue that each organization's particular focus on immersive storytelling and pursuit of edgy or taboo topics draw upon the same aesthetic appeals to sensorial and often non-cognitive experience, reflecting a deeper entanglement between circulating affective content, platform monetization, and the distributions of value within digital culture. Drawing on critical scholarship analyzing the relationships between affect and digital politics, I find that the affective architectures of spaces like YouTube continuously surface videos that engage viewers at the "gut," a modality of affect that has been defined as *viscerality*. I connect this modality of affect to broader conversations about the visceral registers of decolonial politics, which are reshaped by the neoliberal logics of brand culture. I conclude by proposing that commercial algorithmic infrastructures introduce an economics of viscerality, in which the colonial and decolonial registers of viscerality compete and collide, while also acting as a horizon of capture for capitalist and political enclosure.

Finally, my last chapter draws together the threads of these previous three chapters to examine the ways that visceral aesthetics and the economic structures of affective mediation within digital platforms take shape in media ecologies outside of the US. VICE Media has gained significant presence in regions as diverse and robust as Australia, Indonesia, parts of Europe and parts of the Middle East. Like the theoretical track of the previous chapter, instead of lionizing VICE as a company uniquely tapped into the pulse of global youth culture, this chapter places VICE's "immersionist" visualities in conversation with scholarship contending with the complexities of global media and its intersections with

documentary. While previous chapters explore debates about VICE's space within the fields of journalism, this chapter analyzes VICE's media empire through the lens of documentary's problematic entanglements with colonial visualities. Drawing on feminist postcolonial scholarship on documentary and postcolonial visibilities, as well as global media scholarship that maps the complex machinations and scale-making projects of contemporary global industries and cultures, this chapter grapples with the state of documentary, participatory media, and digital video. This chapter attempts to answer a question from Chow that haunts the viral circulations of visceral politics and the performativity of digital video cultures in a platform-dominant visual ecology: "has the ubiquity of such commodified visibilities replaced freedom's relevance altogether, in an age in which human existence seems inconceivable without viral media dependency, which therefore must be recognized as nothing less than a vital force—literally, a life link?"⁶¹

⁶¹ Chow, *Entanglements*, 168.

Chapter One

The VICE Guide to (New) Media Capital in Hipster Williamsburg: Authentic Brooklyn Cool

“So this is a tale of gentrification. It’s a tale of people from different cultures coming together in really weird ways. And of course, it’s a tale of wrecking your life and wasting your 20’s doing tons of the worst cocaine that a Spanish-speaking New York drug dealer has ever stepped on.”

-*Vice* magazine, 2008¹

“The marriage between art, millennial politics, and old-fashioned capitalism [in Williamsburg] will strike some as Marx’s worst fear come true. But even the haters would have to admit that it tastes and looks good.”

Kay S. Hymowitz, *City Journal*, 2016²

Published in the January 2008 issue of *Vice* magazine, an article titled “Please Snort Me: An Oral History of Brooklyn’s Most Notorious Bar” introduces readers to a piece of Williamsburg legend—a “dingy Puerto Rican coke bar” aptly named Kokie’s Place. The introduction hails readers with a flippant tone, beckoning the “young whippersnappers” presumed to be reading the article to indulge in this piece of folklore from Williamsburg’s recent, yet somewhat distant past. The rest of the piece features a series of vignettes pieced together from interviews with various Kokie’s Place patrons during the “hazy era known as

¹ Vice Staff, “Please Snort Me: An Oral History of Brooklyn’s Most Notorious Bar,” in *News, Nudity & Nonsense: The Best of Vice Magazine Vol. II 2003-2008*, Jesse Pearson and Amy Kellner, eds. (Brooklyn, NY: Vice Books, 2009), 96-97.

² Kay S. Hymowitz, “Portrait of the Neighborhood as a Hipster Haven,” *City Journal*, Autumn 2016.

1999.”³ Tracking from “The Snowy Heyday” to “The Comedown” and finishing with “The Bubble Bursts,” the article captures the eked-out sense of exhilaration, discovery, and strange encounters that characterized the Williamsburg art and subsequent DIY scenes during the 1990’s and early 2000’s.

The level of access, familiarity, and candor reflected in the often mortifyingly honest accounts of Kokie’s Place featured in the article (which I analyze in a later section) suggests that the *Vice* magazine staff were insiders to a rather exclusive Williamsburg scene that often featured blacked-out windows and illicit encounters. Yet, when this article was published in 2008, the lifestyle magazine’s tenure in Williamsburg spanned less than a decade. Started in 1994 as a free Montreal-based alternative lifestyle magazine by founders Suroosh Alvi, Shane Smith, and Gavin McInnes, *Vice* magazine trafficked in a punk-infused mix of taboo topics, hedonism, and scenes from various cultural undergrounds. The magazine was most popular among young audiences for its edgy and ironic attention to off-color topics and urban style. By 1999, the magazine had garnered enough attention and financial success to move to New York City. Financial hardship brought about by the dot-com bust in 2001 forced the young company to relocate from Manhattan to Williamsburg, which would mark its accidental yet fortuitous entrance into the bubbling DIY music and underground party scene that had begun taking shape in the 1990’s.⁴ Feeding off the energy of “Brooklyn cool” that would entice Manhattanites to cross the bridge to Brooklyn more frequently over the next decade, VICE’s move to Williamsburg shaped the company’s brand as they transitioned from producing boyish, irreverent magazines to building a global youth media empire billed as

³ Vice Staff, “Please Snort Me.”

⁴ Suroosh Alvi, Gavin McInnes, and Shane Smith, “Vice—The Whole Story,” in *The Vice Guide to Sex and Drugs and Rock And Roll*, Suroosh Alvi, Gavin McInnes, and Shane Smith, eds. (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 2003): 10-12.

“the Bad Boy Brand” and a “guerrilla” video network.⁵ A published volume of *Vice*’s greatest hits during this era gives insight into the circulating desires and creative expressions tapped into by VICE’s budding “global empire of hedonism”: a self-touted “degrading and disgusting lifestyle of sex and drugs and rock and roll and death.”⁶ VICE’s presence in Williamsburg was far from inevitable, and yet the young company’s success is both indebted to and has largely impacted the politics and material structures of this formerly working-class Brooklyn neighborhood.

In fact, urban studies scholar Sharon Zukin identifies VICE Media as one of the two largest tech companies in New York City (the other being the digital craft marketplace, Etsy).⁷ Once a neighborhood dominated by textile manufacturing and the hulking Domino Sugar Refinery on its historic waterfront, Williamsburg has since become synonymous with the cutting edge, both in regard to cultural trends and the broader creative competition in the start-up economy. At its peak, VICE was a strong presence in the neighborhood, employing around 1,000 Brooklyn residents in a 75,000-square foot office refurbished from the bones of former Domino Sugar properties on the shores of the previously neglected Brooklyn waterfront.⁸ The iconic VICE Media offices featured in more recent content displays a minimalist, industrial-chic aesthetic of exposed brick and open floor plans that connects Williamsburg’s “gritty” past with the production of cutting-edge content. But these were not VICE’s original headquarters in Brooklyn. Rather, they represent not only a shift towards a more polished vision of post-industrial renewal, but also a strategic move by CEO Shane

⁵ Lizzie Widdicombe, “The Bad-Boy Brand,” *The New Yorker*, 1 April 2013; Robert Levine, “A Guerrilla Video Site Meets MTV,” *The New York Times*, 19 November 2007.

⁶ Alvi, et. al, *The Vice Guide to Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll*, back cover.

⁷ Sharon Zukin, *The Innovation Complex: Cities, Tech, and the New Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 140.

⁸ Eriq Gardner, “Inside Vice’s New 75K-Square-Foot Headquarters in Brooklyn,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 15, 2016.

Smith in 2014 to both accommodate VICE's growing workforce and capitalize on (or perhaps cannibalize) the underground reputation of the space crafted by the small DIY music venues, light manufacturing businesses, and a circus school that had taken root there in the early and mid-2000's.

The transformation of this block of buildings on the Williamsburg waterfront epitomizes the transitions wrought by the entrances and exits of industrial and post-industrial forms of production, waves of artists and creative workers, local patterns of investment and disinvestment, and shifts in capital interests. Returning to the above epitaph, these changes were felt socially as early as 2001: the eulogizing implied by presenting this piece as "an oral history" suggests that 2008 Williamsburg already bore little resemblance to the one "before" gentrification in 1999 despite the fact that the article preceded the wave of luxury housing, tech investment, and public-private partnered development initiatives that have reshaped the Brooklyn skyline into a chic, modern "innovation complex," complete with architecturally innovative incubator/co-working spaces and high-rise luxury apartment towers.⁹ In fact, "Please Snort Me" locates the turn of the millennium as "a pivotal era in Williamsburg history" because it was "when the neighborhood finally went from kind of depressing because it wasn't Manhattan to really depressing because it's full of assholes fresh out of art school."¹⁰ While 2008 *Vice* staff writers mourned the death of "real" Williamsburg, marked by the closing of Kokie's place in 2001, 2014 VICE Media employees benefited deeply from the displacement of the last dregs of pre-Web 2.0 DIY/maker culture that characterized the buildings' former tenants 285 Kent, Glasslands, and Death By Audio. By 2016, Smith silenced initial criticism of VICE's headquarters move and realigned the company's mission

⁹ For more on innovation complex, see Zukin, *The Innovation Complex*.

¹⁰ Vice Staff, "Please Snort Me," 97.

with the incoming wave of young creatives by stating that “we don’t want to be cool. The content has never been better.”¹¹

Read at its surface, the type of “weird mixing of cultures” presented in “Please Snort Me” might suggest the story of Kokie’s, Williamsburg DIY, and *Vice* magazine’s branding of “Brooklyn cool” is a rather clear story of gentrification. The introduction to the piece even admits as much. But digging deeper into the relationship between *Vice* magazine and a turbulent Williamsburg (and the greater Brooklyn borough) at the turn of the century offers a more complex tale about broader shifts in media, urban policy, and urban imaginaries in a liminal period between the era of synergistic conglomeration within the media industries of the 1980’s and the tech-driven, flexible work patterns of creative industries and economies of the 2010’s. Despite the central role of Williamsburg in the ultimate, if unexpected coherence of a lucrative Brooklyn brand, the seedy, underground Williamsburg described in “Please Snort Me” that made “Brooklyn cool” barely resembles the highly commercialized, sanitized, and aestheticized version of Williamsburg today.

Vice magazine offers a rich case for closer examination of the creative economy precisely because of its longevity of residence in Brooklyn. *Vice*’s ability to weather rather rapid changes—and brand them for an increasingly affluent audience—provides insight into the increasingly precarious and somewhat parasitic dynamics of creative industries/media capital at the turn of the millennium. Through the dissemination of the on-the-ground style of VICE guides, *Vice* magazine helped popularize the grit and glamour of Williamsburg, helped disseminate the DIY scene to a more widespread audience, and then built its brand off the Brooklyn “grit” that now continues to reshape neighborhoods in the borough and across the

¹¹ Gardner, “Inside Vice’s New 75K-Square-Foot Headquarters”

globe. It's no coincidence that some of VICE's global headquarters are linked to other global creative hubs, such as London, Los Angeles, Melbourne, Tokyo, Amsterdam, Paris, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Singapore, Jakarta, Mumbai, and Seoul. Examining the situation of VICE's approach in relationship to a broader terrain of New York lifestyle magazines also uncovers who's often left out of conversations about urban development and reinvestment in post-industrial urban downtowns: those who had formerly provided the "weird mixing of different cultures" that made Williamsburg a community of sorts for struggling artists outside of Manhattan and provided the thrills and dangers that gave early urban pioneers the sense of grit, danger, and authenticity that would later be mapped onto luxury loft apartments to make way for more lucrative tenants and forms of business.

By tracing *Vice* magazine as an ambivalent site of corporate aspirations and anti-establishment, underground affects, this chapter examines how this careful brand positioning is something both inherently tied to the precarious industry structures of the post-industrial creative economy, as well as a cultural extension of older desires and aspirations that have persistently shaped what can be considered the authentic, alternative, or edgy. I also locate this critique in material spaces, pushing back on notions of a deterritorialized speculative capital common to post-Fordist critiques and arguing that it's precisely the distinct and competing articulations of "the local" and "the authentic" that drive urban development and renewal projects meant to reorganize urban life for new media capital. While the entanglements between media and global capitals like New York City have a long history, what *Vice*'s relationship to urban downtowns like Williamsburg suggests is that new media capital has reorganized urban space towards a precarious mode of governance based on the crafting and selling of authentic experience.

Urban Authenticity: Lifestyle Media and the Branded City

In many ways, the story of VICE, Williamsburg, and the shifting symbolic and material infrastructures of gentrification began elsewhere, specifically with changes happening across the East River in 1970's Manhattan. Destabilized by a waning domestic manufacturing industry, divestment from public services at the hand of increasingly neoliberal economic policies, and a significant population loss to New Jersey and the surrounding suburbs, 1970's New York City was experiencing both a financial crisis and an "image crisis."¹² The requisite blighted image and near financial collapse of the city spawned new efforts to make New York City more desirable to tourists, particularly within image-focused Manhattan. As Miriam Greenberg posits, efforts to save the city were directed towards re-marketing New York City for a pool of potential suburban tourists. Instead of directing attention inwards to address community-raised issues within neighborhoods, the city leaned on circulating media forms—particularly film and television—to craft "cleaned up visions, presenting New York as a safe and exciting city for the 'average' white, middle-class consumer."¹³

These re-branding efforts gave rise to a slate of kitschy slogans and campaigns, such as "I <3 NY" and "The Big Apple," while simultaneously passing legislation meant to Disinfect commercial centers like Times Square in order to bolster tourism. Yet, the popular images of New York City throughout the 1970's remained rather gritty, suggesting a division between curated images of a "family-friendly" New York City (represented by destinations

¹² Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York: How A City in Crisis Was Sold to the World* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 9.

¹³ Ibid, 11.

like Times Square) and a “real” New York City filled with urban gloom, grit, and danger. Furthermore, this type of family friendly branding of New York City did not reflect the city that residents experienced, leaving out “the daily struggles of citizens enduring austerity measures, layoffs, or arson” and the scenes that Greenberg argues constitute the “cultural renaissance” within cities today—underground clubs, downtown art galleries, and elaborate forms of graffiti and street art.¹⁴

The meteoric changes in New York City’s urban landscapes—from SoHo to the Lower East Side to the outer boroughs starting with Brooklyn—have become a hotbed for debates around gentrification, a term that encapsulates a variety of changes within cities associated with paving the way for more affluent for residents, often through long processes of displacement within lower income communities. Many urban studies scholars and critical geographers, such as Neil Smith and Saskia Sassen, have cited numerous reasons for gentrification, ranging from forms of new imperialism, to an unfortunate externality of changing markets, to an unintended consequence of diversity discourse.¹⁵ The proliferation of media texts devoted to the topic, including journalistic coverage, investigative podcasts, and fictional forms like films, web series, and television shows, suggest its entrenchment in contemporary spatial and cultural politics. What these sources reveal is that gentrification is a complex, entangled, and multi-faceted process; one that is bound up with local political struggles, racial politics, transnational finance capital, a shifting labor force, and changes in tastes, lifestyles, and political stances. The racial politics involved in the contrast between celebrations of certain forms of urban living now and the longer history of intentional

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ For example, see Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

disinvestment in urban communities of color makes the dynamics of gentrification and/or urban displacement particularly significant to understand and unpack across multiple discursive communities.

Yet, even as the subject has emerged within popular discourse as a contentious and deeply divisive topic, the symbolic and material markers of gentrification have become codified, standardized, and even cliché. Carefully composed images of cafes, high-rise, amenity-filled apartment buildings billed as luxury lofts, “locavore” restaurants, craft cocktails, boutiques, and burgeoning arts and culture destinations flood social media feeds, presenting curated individual encounters with urban space that are at once personalized and also highly typified. The outcomes of New York City’s re-branding efforts thus seem to suggest that, despite the wide circulation of kitschy sloganeering like “I <3 NY,” the more economically beneficial legacy of the city’s image crisis in the 1970’s was happening under the radar of these larger, suburban-oriented brand campaigns.

This legacy, with its resonances with neo-bohemian tastes and lifestyles, was the emergence of what Sharon Zukin has identified as “loft living.”¹⁶ Often described as artist-led gentrification, formerly industrial cities like New York City, London, and Chicago witnessed the rise of an unlikely development model beginning in various global cities, like New York City and Paris. 1970’s SoHo (a neologism short for “South of Houston St.”) is a particularly crystallizing example of how the frames of “urban revitalization” and a new romanticism with urban living took hold in the U.S., with other working-class neighborhoods like Wicker Park and Shoreditch following similar patterns in subsequent decades.¹⁷ In this

¹⁶ Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982/2014).

¹⁷ For more on Wicker Park’s gentrification, see Richard Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Post-Industrial City*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2010).

model, artists, the state, and real estate played a central role in transforming a deteriorating manufacturing-based urban infrastructure into spaces renowned for creativity, culture, and novel forms of shopping and consumption. The bohemian “cafe-societies” that characterized these hip neighborhoods provided a blueprint for the exposed brick and repurposed buildings of today’s urban downtowns across the U.S. and the globe.

Zukin’s body of work contests universalizing narratives, arguing that easy narratives of inevitable “waves” of gentrification miss the nuances and contingencies that gave rise to loft living’s popularization in the first place. In her monograph *Loft Living*, Zukin presents the argument that many economic or sociological analyses that focus solely on market causes and effects or supply and demand diminish the cultural legacy of the loft living movement. Due to changes in postwar U.S. culture, Zukin contends that loft living cohered just as much through an emergent “aesthetic conjuncture” within changing middle-class lifestyle aspirations as through the ready supply of cheap, abandoned warehouse space.¹⁸ Combined, shifting cultural tastes, economic conditions, and urban crises facilitated a broader reorientation to urban space and urban architecture.

According to Zukin, these changes in middle- and upper-class tastes and aspirations, iconified in the loft living movement, were the catalyst for the emergence of a new accumulation strategy meant to supplant or replace waning modes of Fordist mass production.¹⁹ Cultural consumption and cultural products rose to the forefront across these constituencies, and a newfound appreciation of historic architecture and forms of urban infrastructure chafed against circulating urban renewal proposals that proposed a “slash and

¹⁸ Zukin, *Loft Living*, 15.

¹⁹ Ibid, 176-178.

burn” method for dealing with deteriorating manufacturing centers.²⁰ To prevent alienating this new wealthy constituency, urban developers began to reimagine the forms of production that sustained cities’ economies. Urban centers that historically prided themselves on their working-class, industrial publics shifted focus from creating tangible goods to providing more immaterial services. Zukin calls this new model the “Artistic Mode of Production,” whereby investment in arts and cultural infrastructures are used to “renew” and revitalize urban space, which became the compromise between loft dwelling artists, middle-class transplants, and city officials.²¹ As Zukin describes, this era of “developers found that art, when it was set within the proper physical and institutional framework—the museum or the cultural center—could become a vehicle for its own valorization. The growing value of art also enhanced the value of related factors: the urban *forms* that grew around it, the activity of *doing* it, and most important, the status of *consuming* it. These processes of valorization commanded—or even demanded—a wider public for art and culture than had existed at this time.”²²

This radical reinvention of art as a potential source of economic value, as well as the invention of a bourgeois “artistic lifestyle,” created a new set of tastes and aspirations. While only semi-legal at first, converting abandoned manufacturing buildings into artist studio-residence spaces introduced a new set of tastes, imaginaries, and relationships to New York City, particularly for highly educated, but underpaid artists. Soon after, artist-renovated lofts became prized investment prospects for a higher class of cultural elites, eventually shaping the aspirational goals of a broader audience of middle-class consumers. Loft living’s

²⁰ Ibid, 176.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 177.

paradoxical draw for consumers and artists alike hung on the violation of rigid boundaries (“home and work, hedonism and domesticity, and public and private space”) and a growing aversion to mass culture.²³ Relationships to place and space began to shift towards re-interrogating forms of locality, particularly through a nostalgic attachment to an era where the local impacted the look, feel, and experience of space (a feature missing from the homogeneity of suburban communities). Loft living for Zukin “marks a different perception of space and time and a new relation between art and industry” that has since filtered its way into various mass-produced items and forms of urban design.²⁴

What SoHo’s loft living and other urban movements to convert and repurpose disinvested urban infrastructures did was to (unintentionally) link urban development to investment in arts and cultural infrastructure. Most importantly, however, the connection between urban loft living, and the housing and infrastructural markets that emerged around it, gave rise to a revaluation of culture—it framed culture as a form of economic development vital to post-industrial modes of production. Deploying culture as development works here in two ways: by re-valorizing deteriorating manufacturing space as a celebrated aesthetic, it presents a sanitized celebration of urban space and communities while severing these histories of urban space from the struggles and tactics of the communities that were dependent upon manufacturing economies. By celebrating the diversity and persistence of the community that still remained, it also extracts value from the pre-existing urban village in order to make way for a new imagined community of artists with fewer and shallower political ties to the neighborhood due to the relative skill and mobility they maintain despite self-perceptions of precarity. With its somewhat anti-consumerist models of repurposing and

²³ Ibid, 60.

²⁴ Ibid, 60.

renewal, loft living presented a more attractive development model than more spatially violent urban development models like freeway expansion and tear-down methods for resolving blight. Despite the movement's romantic visions of urban villages, however, this revalorization of urban real estate resulted in a further enclosure of public space and the economization of arts and culture. Space formerly accessible to working-class communities and small manufacturing businesses was "repurposed" through new models for "mixed use" zoning and city-based tax incentives for real estate developers and corporate investment spawned by the popularity of loft living in SoHo.

These shifts in consumption, dwelling, and forms of production founded on the negation of modern suburban life became the fuel for a regime of discursive production that rearticulated the value of curating alternative urban lifestyles through cultural consumption. During the post-war period, this was still tied to a rather leftist agenda of politics, rooted in exploring unique, non-massified forms of consumption and often filtered through the lens of nostalgic celebrations of an older, more industrial and tactile past, such as incorporating antique machinery into interior decorative features. But even at this early stage, media became the vehicle for circulating this shift in urban imaginaries. Zukin's later work emphasizes the relationship between forms of media and changes in urban lifestyles more broadly, but Miriam Greenberg's *Branding New York* argues that the emergence of a new cultural media form—the urban lifestyle magazine—was a specific forum for circulating early discourses around forms of urban living.²⁵ Greenberg contends that these publications' coincidental appearance alongside the city's "image crisis" were part and parcel of a broader shift in urban development prioritization, which moved more towards speculative forms of

²⁵ Greenberg, *Branding New York*, 71-96.

“renewal,” like city branding initiatives, and away from investment in public services, like education, welfare, and community social programs.²⁶ While attending to the broader moves of local stakeholders, Greenberg also argues that lifestyle magazines like *New York* magazine played a substantial role in forging urban imaginaries around ideas of authenticity, creativity, flexibility and urbanity through consumption-oriented forms of civic participation and community identity.²⁷

Amongst the variety of factors, policies, and stakeholders in the move to re-brand New York City that Greenberg traces throughout the book, she unpacks the impact of *New York* magazine on reorienting city dwellers and tourists alike to the overlooked value of “Fear City.” By October 1975, New York City was on the brink of bankruptcy. Many contentious headlines and myths circulate about this bleak period of time in the city’s history, and the grittiness of NYC’s post-industrial decline tinged popular representations of the city. *New York* magazine, originally published as a weekly addition to the *New York Herald Tribune* took a decidedly different approach by providing what its bold writers, editors, and designers described were the best ways to “survive and thrive” in a crumbling city.²⁸ According to Greenberg, this produced three genres of coverage across the 1960’s and 1970’s issues: insights into forms of cultural and political expression (“radical chic”), underground shopping guides directing New Yorkers towards overlooked or cheaper fare often in the outer boroughs (“the urban consumer manual”), and detailed reports on what Greenberg identifies as “the New York power game.”²⁹ The authors who ushered in the bold new voice of this generation of New Yorkers, like Tom Wolfe and Barbara Goldsmith, were

²⁶ Ibid, 36-38.

²⁷ Ibid, 71-72.

²⁸ Ibid, 72.

²⁹ Ibid, 79.

positioned at the forefront of the New Journalism movement—a movement that privileged bold commentary, an on-the-ground style of reportage, and a distinctive point of view.³⁰

Here we see resonances between the new waves of loft-dwelling artists, middle- to upper-class aspirants, and shifting media forms and discourse: both centered on the transgression of cultural boundaries in the pursuit of a deeper sense of authenticity or truth. *New York* magazine might have catered to upper class readers who were already active participants in forms of cultural distinction, but the writers' fluid movement between elements of high and low culture served to also invite the perspectives and voices of those typically beyond the cultural sphere of the New York arts scene. According to Greenberg, *New York* magazine presented “writing that both celebrates the working class and strives to transcend it.”³¹ The common theme of New Yorkers' grit and big dreams was forged as an alliance between working class communities and those who visited them for a “return” to some lost sense of culture. In essence, *New York* magazine attempted to build a new image of New York City that celebrated being a local through highlighting the best of both high- and low-cultural forms in the city. By crafting a local or insiders' narrative positionality, it also affirmed New Yorkers' grit and determination despite the bleak representations circulating in film and television and the sanitized versions of New York City pursued in touristic branding campaigns.

In some ways, these novel forms of boundary-crossing challenged more mainstream forms of reportage and representation precisely because “they journeyed into non-white, working-class neighborhoods in Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx, and the far reaches of Manhattan to deal with issues of racism and poverty seldom featured in the mainstream

³⁰ Ibid, 74-77.

³¹ Ibid, 82.

press.”³² *New York* also challenged genre norms by violating the boundaries between editorial and design work, lifestyle journalism and hard-hitting news, and represented voices and desires from a variety of boroughs. In this way, the magazine’s staff viewed the publication as a “service provider” for those still trying to survive and move up in New York society. It also usefully brought insight into the conditions affecting the outer boroughs, albeit these pieces were often framed in a travelogue-like style that celebrated the potential rewards of occasionally “slumming it” for the magazine’s midtown Manhattan readers.

Yet, these pieces of the urban consumer manual fell short in other ways. As Greenberg also points out, “these representations were contained within a framework of voyeuristic pleasure-seeking in the city’s colorful, working-class neighborhoods that often upheld the stereotype of the bargain-obsessed female consumer.”³³ As the magazine moved forward, this trend of a consumption-based form of urban survival began to overshadow the more overtly political content. Columns like “Underground Gourmet” and issues like “The Guerrilla Guide for the Consumer: A Field Guide of Strategy and Tactics for the New York Shopper” gradually began to shift the political commitments of the magazine towards a consumption-based form of political expression.³⁴ Greenberg suggests that these consumer-oriented pieces, and their rise in popularity, paved the way for socially invested forms of consumption. In order to fit with the rest of the magazine’s bold and opinionated stance, these articles “presented themselves as socially worthwhile... by positioning consumption as a means of mending the rifts of a race- and class-divided city.”³⁵ In fact, columns like “Underground Gourmet” could arguably be the primary source of a wide range of popular

³² Ibid, 79.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 85.

³⁵ Ibid, 82.

media productions involving celebrating locally run restaurants in places considered off-the-beaten-path.

Simultaneously, the city's urban development strategies turned away from investing public funds in helping already existing urban communities and towards privileging the “standpoint of the out-of-towner,” resulting in a coalition between “local financial and real estate elites, media and culture industries, and an entrepreneurial government.”³⁶ This powerful combination of stakeholders not only bolstered the types of cultural development that would signify a cleaner, and more affluent vision of New York City and attract more tourism, but it also reshaped the urban renewal strategies of post-industrial cities worldwide, resulting in institutionalized relationships that began to “chip away at New York’s longstanding reputation as a liberal, working-class city.”³⁷

What *New York* magazine accomplished was to sediment a set of tastes and desires that could cohere around a more gritty, yet opulent vision of New York City. In other words, *New York* contributed just as much to the “re-branding” of New York City through its approach to creating cultural discourse as large-scale efforts pursued by local administrations. Surrounding this more “underground” version of New York’s brand is an attempt to represent New York City’s grit as a type of authenticity distinct from mass forms of consumption and culture - precisely the underlying desires that sparked and popularized loft-living in the city. Yet, it’s important to note the uneven terrain of these forms of cultural discourse. Through predominantly middle-class efforts, grit and authenticity became defined by cultural gatekeepers, like *New York* magazine, to mark a consumptive form of politics that conflates political participation with purchasing or other lifestyle decisions. This creates a

³⁶ Ibid, 14.

³⁷ Ibid.

particularly uneven playing field for determining which parts of the city's vast and variegated communities are "authentically" New York City, particularly as forms of authenticity, attachment, and culture become further entrenched in new media logics that privilege cohesive brands with a somewhat exclusionary set of symbolic markers.

Zukin in particular is wary of the ways that authenticity flexes cultural and discursive power within the social and material fabrics of cities, which up until this point had maintained a certain amount of pride in the mix of socioeconomic, cultural, and global citizens that called New York City home. She writes that:

Authenticity involves time... in three different ways. First, the appeal of authenticity suggests that we cling to the ideal of a timeless city that never changes, and we use this ideal, represented by cultural images of a specific historical period, as an absolute standard for judging urban experience. But second, our mental images of authenticity do reflect change, for each generation has an experience of the city in its own time that shapes what its members think about the houses, stores, and people that 'belong' on a block, in a neighborhood, and in the city as a whole. Third, thinking about authenticity shows the importance of time in the broadest sense because city dwellers are increasingly concerned with making their way between the promise of creation and the threat of annihilation, whether by urban renewal or gentrification, by warfare or ecological disaster.³⁸

While this may sound benign—the typical dynamics of urban life—the image looks a lot bleaker when placed in the context of shifting practices of consumerism and their

³⁸ Zukin, *Naked City*, 49.

relationship to media. Zukin further argues that what we deem as authentic has changed in significant ways, as authenticity has now “taken on a different meaning that has little to do with origins and a lot to do with style. The concept has migrated from a quality of people to a quality of things, and most recently to a quality of experiences.”³⁹ This shapes the ways that people interact with space, shapes expectations, and shifts hierarchies around who has the right to “belong” in public space, particularly as “new tastes displace those of longtime residents because they reinforce the images in politicians’ rhetoric of growth, making the city a 24/7 entertainment zone with safe, clean, predictable space and modern, upscale neighborhoods.”⁴⁰

But beyond space and time, authenticity also dictates (often economic) values for forms of work and lifestyle, as well as the media that curate and disseminate these tastes. As gestured to above, the cultural power to locate, assign, and disperse discourse around authenticity is not concentrated in the typical power centers of capitalists or the state, but rather in the hands of the core of post-industrial industry: media. Media and popular cultures scholars such as Sarah Banet-Weiser and Arlene Dávila, have detailed the ways that neoliberal practices that value authenticity intersect with media consumption patterns, textual qualities, and industry structures.⁴¹ Specifically, authenticity has risen to the fore in circles discussing novel convergences between corporate forms of branding and individual expressions of creativity.

³⁹ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 4.

⁴¹ Arlene Davila, *Culture Works: Space, Value, and Mobility Across the Neoliberal Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Sarah Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

Sarah Banet-Weiser has provided careful analyses of how authenticity works to direct aspirations and manage articulations of difference or politics through consumptive forms. She argues that, in some ways, authenticity becomes the measurement of cultural value within a broadened definition of convergence culture.⁴² Because the line determining the authentic and the commercial is difficult to determine, authenticity itself becomes a site for convergence and deferred definition, particularly as it is deployed to judge “good” and “bad” media objects. The turn of the century was precisely when authenticity became something that was not something innate, but something to aspire towards and obtain through purchasing power. Banet Weiser argues that the “reason so many seek out authenticity is precisely because it cannot be managed and rendered but is rather a state of being, a quality that most people hope to have.”⁴³ In this way, aspiring for an authentic life, authentic work, and authentic experiences places cultural pressure on individuals, employers, and cities to curate singular, articulable identities for each. Banet-Weiser also argues that branded cities change the types of culture we value within cities, stating that “the priorities of the branded city shifts from the provision of tangible use-values to the projection of intangible exchange-values, and the city itself is increasingly transformed from a real place of value and meaning for residents and workers to an abstract space for capital investment and profit-making, and a commodity for broader consumption.”⁴⁴ Branding thus becomes a way to articulate authenticity and difference, yet it also tethers these cultural formations to an increasingly economic logic that challenges individuals, companies, and cities to manage their image instead of embracing multiplicities.

⁴² Sarah Banet-Weiser, “Convergence on the Street: Rethinking the Authentic/Commercial Binary,” *Cultural Studies* 25, nos. 4-5 (2018): 641-658.

⁴³ Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM*, 112.

⁴⁴ Banet-Weiser, “Convergence on the Street,” 648.

This logic signals a cultural shift away from evaluating community welfare and towards privileging surface factors and forms of sensorial consumption, where value is dictated by the attractiveness of a particular place to outsiders or its ability to provide returns on investment for entrepreneurs and investment capital. More significantly, it also signifies the rise of a different form of spatial organization than the previous divisions of urban space. Instead of industrially clustered districts (meatpacking, garments, furs, etc.) that encouraged strong ties between neighboring businesses, locality in SoHo communicated a produced sense of identity that (unintentionally) welcomed the increased commercialization of formerly non-commercial space. The violation of traditional boundaries and forms of organization, most clearly epitomized by the illegal, yet uninhibited conversion of loft space into residential use, paved the way for future convergences between formerly separate realms that are now characteristic of late-capitalist work, life, and space: art and commercial products; work and leisure; consumption and production; dwelling and workspace. The transformation of urban space from places with tangible use-values to locations rebranded to facilitate consumptive practices, cultural distinction, or other speculative projects, intensifies the divisions and precarities already endemic to cities.

Most importantly, 1970's SoHo cemented the links between artistic and cultural production, New York City, and urban forms of living, giving rise to a new class sensibility within the geographic imaginaries in the U.S. It also introduced a low-cost development model for real estate investors, tilting the power dynamics between state and finance even more in favor of real estate brokers. This both marks the end of the association between urban areas and either working-class manufacturing communities or corporate headquarters and financial services (in the case of Manhattan) and the beginning of the use of cultural

policy to promote the development of U.S.’ knowledge and creative economies. In this model/era, culture is equated with vibrant arts communities, and investment in arts infrastructure becomes the cheapest way of eventually forging the tastes and consumption patterns of a new urban middle-class and subsequent upper-middle class in a formerly disinvested area.

Ironically, though this vision of artistic cultural energy prides itself on carving out a different path to modes of work and life popularized in post-war U.S. urban imaginaries, it ultimately paved the way for a development model that often implicitly promotes driving out the robust forms of difference that Lefebvre found so vital about “the urban.”⁴⁵ The re-aestheticization of the city, even through forms of renewal and repurposing, ultimately smooths the striated space of urban ways of life outside of the core in favor of promoting a loft-driven homogeneity and navigational ease (with just enough “promise” of danger). Despite the best intentions of a burgeoning arts scene—and the recognition of its cultural significance by state and corporate forms of investment—promoting arts-driven development in New York City made way for the devalorization of other forms of cultural or creative expression that were less conducive to middle-class tastes. And particularly in the case of Williamsburg, media and shifting dynamics of media capital play a major role in the reorganization of urban space and the reorientation of urban life, labor, and forms of belonging.

Branding Grit: Williamsburg’s “Unmediated” Brand and New Media Capital

⁴⁵ For a discussion of Lefebvre’s “right to the city,” see Mark Purcell, “Possible Worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the Right to the City,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2013): 141-154.

Moving from the 1970's to the 1990's, there's a clear throughline both geographically and culturally from the types of urban loft dwelling emerging in SoHo in the late 1960's and early 1970's, the artistic communities of the 1980's Lower East Side, and the 1990's Brooklyn waterfront. In fact, there is perhaps no more or less authentic place (in Greenberg's branded sense) than Williamsburg, Brooklyn. By the 1990's, SoHo had already been overtaken by national brands, well-funded galleries, and celebrities staking claim to the now multi-million dollar converted lofts. In some ways, this began the hunt for "the next bohemia" in New York City, which moved eastward towards the gritty, punk scene of the Lower East Side, with anarchist squatter cooperatives marking the next iteration of anti-capitalist experiments in urban living.⁴⁶ Alongside these shifts came increasingly more types of boundary-crossing lifestyle media, particularly around the DIY aesthetics of the punk scene, where low-budget, locally-produced 'zines were pivotal to fostering local punk communities. In a similar fashion to *New York* for the loft living generation, but with more of the DIY/punk aesthetics and abrasiveness of the punk and anarchist 'zines of Alphabet City, *Vice* magazine participated in cohering a particular brand of "Brooklyn cool."

Brooklyn, specifically its waterfront neighborhoods, has been at the heart of tensions around housing, gentrification, and demographic and material changes in urban forms of living. Since the construction of the Williamsburg Bridge allowed former Lower East Side tenement residents to build new communities in Brooklyn, the borough has maintained a staunchly working-class identity, even across its wide range of ethnic groups and communities. The hulking structures of the Domino Sugar Refinery, Brooklyn Brewing, and countless other manufacturing spaces and port infrastructures on Brooklyn's waterfront stood

⁴⁶ For a semi-autobiographical novel on urban squatter culture in 1990's New York City, see Stacey Wakefield, *The Sunshine Crust Baking Factory* (Akashic Books, 2014).

in stark contrast to the Manhattan skyline. But today's waterfront, particularly the neighborhoods of Williamsburg, Park Slope, and Fort Greene, conjures a starkly different urban imaginary: cafes, art galleries, luxury high-rises, and a landscape dedicated to the infrastructures of a post-industrial creative economy create a picture of amenities-driven upscale living that runs counterintuitive to even the "gritty" Brooklyn of *Vice's* Kokie's Place. These representations of "new Brooklyn" have become synonymous with New York's creative class. In some ways, these media representations have solidified a particular brand of Brooklyn cool for audiences while papering over the deeper histories of disinvestment, entrenched battles over land and affordable housing, and the cannibalized forms of culture that originally made Williamsburg a scene. If SoHo's economic form of culture shaped urban space around the artistic mode of production, Williamsburg's relationship to new media forms of work transformed urban space for the *creative* mode of production.

The major distinction between artistic and creative modes of production is a difference in relationship to space as place. While loft-living artists'—and the lifestyle media surrounding them—intentions emerged out of the desire to forge new artistic communities outside of mass-produced popular culture, DIY Williamsburg's creative brand was leveraged as an attraction in a broader economy of what Sharon Zukin identifies as "destination culture."⁴⁷ In this organization of public space—particularly in cities—public and private investments privilege surface-level forms of renewal, meant to attract tourists, new media and tech companies, and new (wealthier) residents. "Diversity," community history, and authenticity become factors in these aesthetic decisions meant to foster a winning brand for outward audiences, as ultimately "all forms of Destination Culture are judged according to

⁴⁷ Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 219-246

their financial results.”⁴⁸ This creates an uneven terrain of power within public space, as media and tech companies continue to enclose city-owned properties, like parks and recreational centers, and thereby further entrench their power over the configuration of cities. The supplantation of manufacturing infrastructures by new media infrastructures is particularly precarious, as Zukin contends that “[u]nlike factory owners who in the early days of industry built workers’ housing near the mill, media firms that hire creative producers have no interest in whether they can afford to live in the trendy neighborhoods where they have set up shop.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, the production of lifestyle surrounding the flexible, “bohemian” image of creative work—best embodied by bustling nightlife, trendy cafes, and artistic displays—helps to stage the types of authenticity that gives places like Williamsburg their destination status.”⁵⁰

Brooklyn did not emerge as a cultural destination, either for tourists or for artists, until the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. Archival sources documenting Williamsburg’s early art scene specifically flag that Williamsburg existed more as a “geographic community,” built out of necessity for artists priced out of SoHo and the Lower East Side, rather than an aesthetic one built around common artistic pursuits, like the loft living and punk scenes of the Manhattan hip neighborhoods.⁵¹ Williamsburg’s rise to hip, creative capital began to reposition the directionality of movement within the borough, with sharp divisions between “new” and “old” Brooklyn coming to the fore. According to *New York Times*’ A.O. Scott in 2014, “old Brooklyn was a place from which ambitious young people—Jewish, Irish,

⁴⁸ Ibid, 237.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *Brooklyn DIY: The History of the Williamsburg Art Scene 1987-2007* (dir. Marcin Ramocki, 2009).

African-American, Italian—set out, not a place they flocked toward.”⁵² Despite the newness of many of the new Brooklyn residents, there still exists a sense of attachment to the neighborhood’s history and image, with many of these newcomers taking great pride in “the ‘authenticity’ of the neighborhood where they choose to live.”⁵³ Neighborhoods become the battleground for claims of authenticity, community, and conflicting ideas about the real Brooklyn. According to Zukin, these narratives shape the urban imaginary around Brooklyn’s cultural value and urban creative lifestyles more generally: “Brooklyn’s urban imaginary today combines hipsters and new immigrants, lifestyle media and blogs, and both desire to become the next cultural destination and yearning for an urban village that disappeared after World War II. For each generation, though, the idea of Brooklyn’s authenticity shows an aspiration to connect the place where people live to a timeless urban experience.”⁵⁴

This aspiration to “find oneself” and community in the form of an “authentic” urban village is clearly tied to deeper cultural shifts (evidenced by the SoHo loft dwellers) that are at once highly localized and globally prevalent. They are also reflected in and informed by urban policy initiatives and shifts in broader industry practices. Changes in cultural geographies of urban space have only been exacerbated by a proliferation of neoliberal creative city policies, vast reorganizations of industries in response to increased internet presence, and the rising popularity of “creative class” discourses. Writing about the British context, David Hesmondhalgh illustrates how cultural models of regeneration, inspired by the success of SoHo’s role in rebranding New York City, spawned new initiatives and

⁵² A.O. Scott, “Whose Brooklyn Is It Anyway?,” *New York Times*, 28 March 2014.

⁵³ Zukin, *Naked City*, 60.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

policies to re-imagine formerly industrial space nationwide.⁵⁵ Hesmondhalgh sees the move to creative city or creative industry policies as a calculated attempt to redistribute the economic power of cultural production. Citing business and management materials, he argues that the shift from “cultural industries” to “creative industries” was influenced by the need to spark constant innovation.⁵⁶ Creativity, a word with little negative baggage and easily shaped to describe any process of making or innovation, replaced the somewhat elitist connotations or complexities of the word culture.⁵⁷ In other words, being creative is something that can be achieved by all: anyone can (potentially) produce marketable, profitable products “authentically” without having to jump through the institutional hoops of established *cultural* systems of production.

Angela McRobbie finds this re-framing of cultural industries particularly threatening, arguing that the eclipse of culture by creativity threatens to re-shape culture itself into monetizable (or brandable) expressions that deepen ties to capitalist logics of work, life, and self.⁵⁸ In particular, she finds that the imperative to “be creative” insists that creativity “is designated by current modes of biopolitical power, as the site for implementing job creation and, more significantly, labour reform; it is a matter of managing a key sector of the youthful population by turning culture into an instrument of both competition and labour discipline. In doing so, our understanding of culture is increasingly ‘replaced by creativity,’ which functions as ‘a deployment of power to encourage self-actualization through being creative. It is a matter of putting creativity to work.’”⁵⁹ Much like Hesmondhalgh, McRobbie suggests

⁵⁵ David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 5th Edition (London: SAGE Publications, 2019), page numbers unavailable.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Cultural Industries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

⁵⁹ Ibid, 38.

that the displacement of culture for creativity and authenticity reorients the creation of cultural products towards expression of individual experiences and away from deeper engagements with social or collective forms of cultural production.

One of the most visible ways that this process of reorientation manifests is through a burgeoning managerial discourse on branding, self-improvement, and intellectual property, which are rooted in new technologies of the self and the expansion of what Sarah Banet-Weiser has called “brand culture.” In her book *AuthenticTM: The Politics of Ambivalence in Brand Culture*, Banet-Weiser identifies brand culture as a change in cultural logic that blurs typical distinctions between forms of commercial culture and a realm of “authentic,” non-commercial cultural practices and objects. She explores a range of social arenas where brand logics have re-routed aspects of culture—such as religion, feminism, politics, and creativity—into highly-consumptive “cultural spaces defined by branding.”⁶⁰ Her argument refocuses conversations around subcultures that often presume a binary dynamic between a mass-produced commercial culture and realms of more “authentic” culture taking shape outside of or beneath these commercial forms. In contrast to this relationship, Banet-Weiser argues that incorporation within brand culture “is not about capital encroaching on authentic culture but rather is a process of transforming and shifting cultural labor into capitalist business practices.”⁶¹ The entrenchment of brand culture as a cultural logic—alongside its obsession with authenticity—locates political action through the articulation of individual identities and attachments, creating a type of political ambivalence where politics are displayed through consumptive praxis: “When individuals invest in brands as ‘authentic’ culture, it privileges individual relationships over collective ones and helps to locate the

⁶⁰ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM*, 10.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 8.

individual, rather than the social, as a site for political action (or inaction) and cultural change (or merely exchange).”⁶² Extending brand culture to cities, it’s precisely this cultural logic that disinvests from communities invested in social change in order to make room for the entrepreneurial creative city.

Local media forms played a large role in popularizing aesthetics and tastes that could be distilled into a cohesive brand image, particularly following the proliferation of localized content through blogs, wikis, zines, and other forms of DIY content production. What started as shoestring productions forged to gain visibility and build creative networks later became sites for rendering Brooklyn’s authenticity and cultural worth visible to tastemakers nationwide. New small businesses that iconified the “makers movement,” like Brooklyn Works, began to lay claims to a distinguishable Brooklyn identity; one that positioned itself as more “authentic” than the “sell-out” hip neighborhoods across the East River. But this narrative of Williamsburg’s relationship to Manhattan was not something that necessarily happened organically, but rather was rather produced by enterprising individuals trying to break into creative circles. Despite *New York* magazine’s early attempts to identify Williamsburg as “The New Bohemia,” it wasn’t until the late 1990’s that the Brooklyn brand began to take hold in popular discourses and in the built environments of the Brooklyn waterfront.⁶³ It was only after a litany of voices coming from alternative weekly newspapers, flyers, wikis, and blogs emerged and became more easily distributed through websites that Williamsburg’s iconicity began to rise. Independent media forms, often amateurly produced, became the arbiters of authenticity and creativity in the new millennium, and the affordances of early internet culture helped disseminate the tastes and nodes of a new creative scene. This

⁶² Ibid, 10.

⁶³ Brad Gooch, “The New Bohemia: Portrait of the Artist’s Colony in Brooklyn,” *New York*, June 1992.

signals an important transition in cultural power from legacy publications to amateur, locally produced content and also suggests a deeper connection between 21st century forms of urban gentrification and dynamics of media work and cultural distinction.

In fact, Brooklyn was never intended to become a creative capital like Manhattan's various artistic neighborhoods. During the 1980's, city officials went to great lengths to prevent artists from taking over vital manufacturing space from the primarily industrial community. According to Zukin, "the city government evicted more than a hundred artists who were living illegally in lofts in the manufacturing zones of Williamsburg and Fulton Ferry (the area soon to be known as Dumbo), to keep space available for manufacturing."⁶⁴ This was probably the final demonstration of government resistance to artist-driven forms of urban renewal, citing that the in-movement of artists had already and would continue to displace key parts of the remaining industrial infrastructure—small manufacturing spaces like metalworking shops and cardboard and rag factories. What this suggests is that the difference between 1980's NYC/Brooklyn and 1990's was the popularization of the internet and the financial potential represented by the rather deregulated business practices involved in early digital business. Instead of attempting to help longtime Brooklyn residents transition into a post-industrial economic environment, city officials pivoted towards valuing the types of creative renewal engendered by creative communities.

This was a common theme in other primarily manufacturing districts in U.S. cities. For example, Chicago's Wicker Park also witnessed a similar boom in creative activity, following many of the same patterns and adhering to many similar tastes as the Williamsburg

⁶⁴ Zukin, *Naked City*, 42.

scene.⁶⁵ This suggests some synergy and connectivity across contexts, leading to questions about what kinds of media affordances, networks, policies, and industrial changes gave rise to these similarities.

I argue that significant changes in media cultures, media industries, and the value of media and tech within a broader neoliberalization of work, life, art, and politics have irrevocably changed relationships between media forms, cultural work, and the production and experience of urban space. Initially, new internet-specific platforms like blogs facilitated novel modes of communication for underground subcultures. Participating in these exclusive cultural circuits not only produced new forms of community, but it also gave insiders cultural capital to leverage into creative careers. Some synergy existed between the aspirations of a creative lifestyle—with its focus on distinction from mass cultural forms—and a broader media industry searching to find and monetize more niche content. Particularly as traditional screen industries competed with splintering audiences and emerging internet culture, mainstream media conglomerates began looking to amateur and independent talent for insight on local scenes. As I show in the next two sections, new media facilitated this transition, both representationally and materially through the imbrication between emergent (and often highly informal) forms of media work and the cultural infrastructures necessary for their often-precarious operations. Cultural capital becomes tied to forms of underground creative expression during this nascent age, where, according to Zukin, “[l]ocal media that were initially developed by and for insiders... were cannibalized by the mainstream media, which were hungry for content.”⁶⁶ Across scholarly work analyzing these shifts in urban

⁶⁵ For a more detailed description of how “neo-bohemias” intersected with emergent forms of digital work, see Richard Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Post-Industrial City*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁶⁶ Zukin, *Naked City*, 45.

space, attending to new forms of media and cultural capital become particularly important because, as Zukin argues, “we cannot consider power to control urban spaces, usually seen as the economic power of capital investors and the legal power of the state, without considering the cultural power of the media, including new media such as wikis and blogs, and that of consumers’ tastes. All of these factors now shape the struggle to control the city’s future.”⁶⁷

What this suggests is a need to re-position, or at least re-scale, current scholarly understandings of media capital. Michael Curtin developed the idea of media capital in order to understand and interrogate the movements of global, regional, and local film and television production, as well as the ways that global screen industries are imbued with and sometimes constrained by, particular spatial logics. In short, “media capital is a concept that at once acknowledges the spatial logics of capital, creativity, culture, and polity without privileging one among them... media capital encourages dynamic and historicized accounts that delineate the operations of capital and the migrations of talent, while at the same time directing attention to socio-cultural forces and contingencies that can engender alternative discourses, practices, and spatialities.”⁶⁸ Drawing from Marxist cultural geographic work, industry and policy analysis, and a global approach to studying media industries that goes beyond reductive notions of media imperialism, Curtin’s foundational work presents a necessary framework for unpacking and analyzing transnational media flows by intervening in unidirectional understandings of how media travel.⁶⁹ Yet, the media capital at work in what I argue are *new* media capitals is at once more localized (targeted at particular

⁶⁷ Ibid, xiii.

⁶⁸ Michael Curtin, In the Shadow of Official Ambition: National Media Policy Confronts Global Media Capital,” (2014). *CARGC Papers*, 7: 7.

⁶⁹ Michael Curtin, “Media Capital: Toward the Study of Spatial Flows,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (2003), vol. 6 (2): 202-228.

neighborhoods and encouraging local competition for investment) and more global (facilitated often through local facilitation of transnational investment, distributed through global channels via the internet). New media capitals often are more piecemeal in nature, sometimes focused in a handful of neighborhoods and often without one particular identifiable industry dominating, such as Hollywood in Los Angeles and Bollywood in Bombay. And as types of media have expanded and changed alongside the rise of digital platforms, studying media flows also should stretch beyond considerations of traditional screen media. Media work itself has become more piecemeal, freelance, and multi-tasked; few media workers can specialize in a particular skill, and instead move through roles fluidly as part and parcel of a broader adoption of subcontracted, freelance, and gig-oriented labor. As I'll discuss in the next sections, this makes new media capitals even more reliant upon individualistic forms of work, often without vital intermediary or protective structures like talent agencies, full-time work, and labor unions. The micro-politics surrounding who can gain access to and succeed in this new media environment, the forms of production cultures that arise in these new spaces and conditions, as well as the raced and classed spatial pressures these new industries introduce are dynamics that impact the shape, form, and circulation of media texts. Thus, understanding how media shape space (and vice versa) involves attending to these micropolitics and how they travel through and with media forms, particularly as they engender new forms of inequality that inevitably shape our experiences of both cities and culture.

In sum, battles over articulations of authenticity within Brooklyn in particular have manifested in both abstract and material ways, facilitated by longer legacies of cultural change and emergent media forms and types of work. The search for authenticity,

connection, creativity, and belonging: these values of the idealized “authentic urban village” are often used within these discourses to conjure community while divorcing it from the robust forms of civic/social participation and organizations of work-leisure characteristic of working-class life that originally inspired Jacobsian images of urban life. Similarly to the SoHo scene, creative entrepreneurs in Williamsburg harnessed the power of media to slowly convert the infrastructures of the industrial downtown district into a cultural destination. A new media capital here is produced not through the deeply entrenched networks of consolidated media corporations, but rather the piecemeal collaboration of individuals participating in a scene and thus establishing an informal network that translates creativity into a cohesive brand. Here, what emerged as “the artistic mode of production” in SoHo has accelerated toward a more entrepreneurial sense of creative production, one where flexibility is valued and authenticity is managed and displayed through participation in emblematic underground sites, such as Kokie’s Place, within a broader exclusive network of creative work.

The VICE Guide to Creative Capital

Turning now to *Vice*’s relationship to these monumental changes in urban development, the story of Kokie’s Place offers a crystallizing example of the desires, affects, and sentiments that characterize the feel (or at least its nostalgic image) of the 1990’s Williamsburg scene and the changes that happen as new media forms continue to re-shape urban space, both of which are reflected in the culture within and surrounding *Vice* magazine. While highly nostalgic in tone, the purpose of the story has less to do with documenting the lifestyles of a hipster subculture and more to do with establishing a narrative around and set

of aspirations or ideals for an “authentic” urban creative class. Placing “Please Snort Me” in the context of *Vice* magazine and broader changes in Williamsburg, we can start to parse the role Kokie’s Place played in VICE and the Brooklyn waterfront’s history beyond the nostalgic frame of hipster folklore, when Brooklyn was, on the one hand, cool and authentic, and on the other, “really depressing.” Reading the oral histories of this node in the creative/weird Williamsburg network in the light of shifting economic discourse around culture and creativity—and how it impacts broader dynamics of creative work—reframes the tone of the story from a celebratory glimpse into youth cultures of the recent past towards one that showcases the informal forms of networking that emerged as the production culture surrounding new media work.

The introduction to this oral history sketches the positionality between the reader and the writer(s) behind the article, which one can assume is the *Vice* editorial team. The reader is hailed as an outsider, a late comer to the hip capital of Williamsburg. *Vice* readers in 2008 are addressed as “whippersnappers,” “kids,” and people unfamiliar with the legend of Kokie’s that “everyone” knew about. The writer(s) establishes their authority to tell this story by dropping names of Brooklyn DIY cultural icons like Fischerspooner, Peaches, and Andrew WK, thereby mapping their connections to local legends and positioning themselves as within the circles of indie originators, pioneers, and founders of the Williamsburg scene. Through these forms of status-marking, *Vice* magazine positions itself as the arbiter of cool and its editorial team as those with the connections, local knowledge, and thus cultural power to determine what is and was “authentic” Williamsburg culture.

The abrasive forms of distinction-making in *Vice*’s editorial tone seem to be both what *Vice* magazine is known for and a reflection of the types of personality that thrived in

new media work at the turn of the century. Trendsetters, insiders, and early adopters of subcultural forms of consumption and production that contrasted high and low forms of culture were privileged across its pages, where anything considered taboo or marginal to a polite, “PC” mainstream culture was welcomed. From fecal matters to porn reviews, and prison fashion to interviews with cannibals or artists, *Vice*’s editorial content aimed to do “smart in a stupid way, and stupid in a smart way.”⁷⁰ Dripping with cultural and literary references, as well as homophobic and racist language, *Vice* magazine’s irreverent humor and obscure reportage signal the company’s originality and status through connections to creative and subcultural networks. Despite curating this authoritative voice, however, VICE founder Suroosh Alvi contends that *Vice*’s authenticity lies in its immediacy and “gonzo” journalistic style.⁷¹ *Vice* magazine articles often present themselves as unmediated or voiced by amateurs representative of the subject matter, with many articles featuring interviews or essays written by marginalized authors, like sex workers, or by prominent underground artists or musicians. This sense of immediacy was later revealed to be an elaborate lie, as co-founder Gavin McInnes admitted to fabricating bylines to make the magazine’s editorial contributions seem more diverse.⁷² Yet, the popularity of these articles suggests a broader desire for immediate encounters with subcultural or marginalized publics amongst *Vice*’s primarily white, young, male, and suburban readership. “Please Snort Me” exemplifies this editorial style by keeping authorial voice minimal and transitioning quickly to the voices of elusive “insiders” familiar with Kokie’s Place.

⁷⁰ David Carr, “Inviting In a Brash Outsider,” *New York Times*, 14 February 2010.

⁷¹ “VICE: Suroosh Alvi,” *How I Built This with Guy Raz*, NPR, September 4, 2017.

⁷² McInnes admits as much this in his memoir, *The Death of Cool: From Teenage Rebellion to the Hangover of Adulthood* (New York: Scribner, 2012), 241.

The article follows a rather linear trajectory, beginning with how different subjects “discovered” or gained access to Kokie’s Place. Rumors about the bar’s history and relationship to ethnic communities and gang activity abound, with many stories elaborating on the types of “coming together in really weird ways” and dangerous or illicit activity taking place inside its blacked-out windows. Intrinsic values communicated throughout these short vignettes include community, freedom, and a type of celebratory proximity to non-white or marginal communities. Many of the brief stories display subjects’ attempts to distinguish themselves from whiteness or privilege, with many referencing eclectic mixes of music and dancing styles or discussing abilities, or inabilities, to negotiate cocaine purchases. Throughout the rest of the article, mentions of gentrification are kept at a minimum, while desires to find “community,” a broader communal sense of “eked out freedom,” and also a number of dangerous encounters cohere as common themes. When interactions with non-white Kokie’s patrons are discussed, the stories are presented as one-sided interactions with a typology of stereotypical images, like “Puerto Rican mamas” and “gangbangers.” Altogether, the vignettes convey a sense of freedom rendered through a lens of relative privilege, whereby interactions with non-white spaces are leveraged as performative distinctions from whiteness. Yet, the broader purpose of the article in terms of *Vice* magazine’s status as “hipster bible” seems somewhat vague—there is no conclusion about how Kokie’s designation as hipster destination impacted the owners or the broader community, no broader takeaways about the forms of diverse community forged there, or really no broader purpose of the piece other than to inform newcomers about Williamsburg’s “lost” authenticity at the hands of newcomer readers.

Read at face value, “Please Snort Me” tells a tale of ephemeral freedom and frenetic, 24/7 energy afforded by the blacked-out windows of an underground location. It paints Williamsburg as a place of “coming together in really weird ways.” This reading underscores the desires of young, creative, typically college-educated young people to forge a new and different path from their assumedly white normative homes. Yet, this story also reveals the ways that stories like “Please Snort Me” conjure a brand image of a space (such as a hip, weird Williamsburg) that serves to obfuscate voices who might critique the original artists’ presence in the neighborhood, thereby effacing the history of Williamsburg “pre-discovery” and amplifying the authority of “original” Williamsburg settlers to define the authenticity of the neighborhood’s history. *Vice* magazine in particular—despite various critiques and commendations—serves as a particularly rich object for defining the new “common sense” around a new hipster bourgeois set of tastes, particularly one that tends to use non-white culture, fashion, and space as a way to create “edgy” content and build reputation amongst an increasingly competitive creative industry.

In many ways, the story of Kokie’s Place and early *Vice* magazine in general epitomizes or renders visible the characteristics of the new “Brooklyn brand” that writer Kay S. Hymowitz argues rose to national attention in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. While the borough beyond key waterfront neighborhoods were mostly left out of these visions, Hymowitz tracks a change in the discourse around Brooklyn as a whole. In her article, she describes a “Brooklyn brand” that emerged as having an “ethic [that] is both countercultural and entrepreneurial, offering an aesthetic of radicalism without the difficult commitment of radical politics.”⁷³ In this sense, the Brooklyn brand represents an aestheticization of urban

⁷³ Kay S. Hymowitz, “Portrait of the Neighborhood as Hipster Haven.”

life and the potentially radical politics that forms of urban kinship and community give rise to. For Hymowitz, there is a deep-seated “tension built into the ‘Brooklyn’ brand... it’s both a local, artisanal, communal protest against the homogenizing forces of corporate culture and a new way of being bourgeois, and as such participating in the destruction of non-middle-class social space. Its rebellious energies are focused largely on restaurants, retail and real estate.”⁷⁴ This quote is particularly clear in how it frames the Brooklyn phenomenon as an issue that combines multiple pressures including new directions in work, tastes, politics, and aesthetics. Sharon Zukin echoes these criticisms, particularly as they paper over other articulations of place that produce a different discourse about Brooklyn authenticity. She highlights the disparity of framing Brooklyn through places like Williamsburg because “[w]hile some industrial neighborhoods such as Williamsburg were becoming hip in the 1990s, other Brooklyn neighborhoods, inner-city areas where blacks and Latinos lived, were stuck with bad housing, failing schools, lack of jobs, and high crime rates.”⁷⁵ Though Black creativity bubbled out of these Brooklyn neighborhoods throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s, such as the work of figures like Spike Lee, Biggie Smalls, Jay-Z, Mos Def, and Busta Rhymes, proximity to these non-white articulations of neighborhood authenticity was leveraged as more proof of white Brooklyn’s grittiness. Despite this appropriation of cultural value, material investment in these predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhoods did not match the enormous development projects set towards “upscaling” hip neighborhoods like Williamsburg.

Thus, these “rebellious energies” are channeled into creative efforts and consumptive politics that ultimately build value for capitalistic ends, often help to perpetuate broader

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Zukin, *Naked City*, 54

structural inequalities, and ultimately continue to divert attention and resources from disadvantaged communities. Both *Vice* magazine and Hymowitz acknowledge these realities of gentrification while simultaneously remaining ambivalent about the outcomes of rapidly changing urban space. The opening epitaph from Hymowitz seems to frame the value of a neighborhood as ultimately what it can provide in terms of consumption and “culture,” suggesting that economic factors and cultural attractions are more important to a community’s “success,” even if it comes at the price of displacing and alienating long-term residents, businesses, and ways of life.

This is not to say that all community members within neighborhoods like Williamsburg were resistant to the so-called improvements wrought by the influx of young creatives. Kokie’s Place, for example, clearly benefited from the new business. Yet, there is a disparity about what kinds of changes are welcome when it comes to preserving the authenticity of a neighborhood. “Please Snort Me” acknowledges that the demise of Kokie’s Place was due to gentrification, but it places the blame for its closure on changing city policing and licensing policies without questioning how the artists’ presence fed into these changes. The section titled “The Bubble Bursts” also elucidates what creatives did *not* want—places like Kokie’s Place to change in order to expand their business. When Kokie’s Place closed to renovate its space, regulars complained that Kokie’s began “pander[ing] to the crowd” with its new decor, which included “mod Ikea gear,” “neon lightning bolts,” and “lame tropical murals.”⁷⁶ This raises the question: Who has agency to succeed and innovate in these spaces, and who is kept frozen in time to preserve “the authenticity” of the neighborhood? “Please Snort Me” reveals that the types of community, collaboration, and

⁷⁶ Vice Staff, “Please Snort Me,” 100.

freedom afforded by underground spaces were felt more between folks working in similar creative circles, bolstered by proximity to cultural difference, rather than between newcomers and longtime residents. Not only does this oral history exclude any long-time residents of Williamsburg or any of the so-called “Puerto Rican mamis” discussed within the included vignettes, but it also lays blame on these stakeholders for Kokie’s eventual “comedown.”

These kinds of changes in the neighborhood privileged newcomers’ tastes and interests, eventually producing an image and sense of community that came at the cost of pricing out the very people who provided the initial infrastructures of creativity and collaboration. In their work studying changes in storefront signage across Brooklyn neighborhoods like Atlantic Yards and Park Slope, sociolinguists Shonna Trinch and Edward Snajdr argue that the slow replacement of text-heavy signs with more minimalist ones reflect a broader change in the convivial relationships between different ethnic groups and communities within a particular neighborhood.⁷⁷ Text-heavy signs that reflect a type of “old school vernacular” often clearly signal services and products, often in multiple languages, in order to address passersby clearly and in an inclusive manner. Minimalist approaches that pare down storefront signage to one word (often laden with cultural reference and wordplay) represent a more exclusive approach to addressing passersby, making discerning the purpose or type of store purposefully opaque and challenging.⁷⁸ Interviews with both old and new community members reflect that such aesthetic changes shift the accessibility and inclusivity of particular streets. Despite both approaches reflecting similar practices of small business ownership (as opposed to corporate chains), Trinch and Snajdr’s findings suggest that the

⁷⁷ Shonna Trinch and Edward Snajdr, “What the Signs Say: Gentrification and the Disappearance of Capitalism Without Distinction in Brooklyn,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 21(1), October 2016.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

spatial politics of “creative” urban space are more complicated (and more entrenched) than simplified explanations that homogenize what “gentrification” looks like and why or how it happens in particular areas. What deserves even more attention than representational forms of place-making, such as touristic or real estate discourse, are the ways that dynamics of urban space lend themselves well to the types of work dynamics endemic to creative work, particularly in the early days when *digital* creative work was an uncharted, distributed, and highly unregulated terrain.

Where people live is often more complex than the appeals of a particular location. In the context of media and creative work, aspiring media workers need to live in proximity to the material and social networks that allow one to navigate production cultures and find work even within well-established media industries. It’s precisely because of the types of contingent and often informal work that go into producing “authentic,” indie/DIY media forms or texts, that new media industries depend even more on localized knowledge than traditional screen industries. Instead of networking taking place through institutional forms, professional opportunities within new media work are often found in informal sites within creative networks, like cafes, bars, underground venues, and other cool places where creative people gather. *Vice* magazine as an emerging new media/tech company provides insight into the structuring desires, aspirations, and implicit rules that characterized the beginnings of new creative work. What was packaged and branded by *Vice* as “an eked-out sense of freedom” may indeed have appeared as such on the surfaces of these creative communities. These informal professional networks definitely led to new types of collaboration, creativity, and representation, but the normalization of these informal—and highly individualistic—work-life arrangements also results in a further entrenchment in economizing cultural

production and culture, thereby putting culture to work and setting forth the dynamics of entrepreneurialization discussed more broadly in scholarship on new media work.

Underlying these insights into the affective shape of Williamsburg's authenticity, what *Vice*'s story of Kokie's Place reveals are the key contradictions within shifting urban imaginaries, cultures of creative work, and the politically ambivalent terrain on which new media work was built. Scholarship tracing major differences between dynamics of "old" media work and "new" media work provides further evidence, with a number of publications affirming that the new pressures and barriers facing young people entering these professional networks revolve around the cultural and financial capital needed to successfully navigate new media networks.

For example, Andrew Ross' foundational *Nice Work if You Can Get It* is significant here for outlining both the promises and the pitfalls of creative work. Ross examines city development plans, policy proposals, and managerial discourse to parse the contours of what he calls "a new geography of work," which reflects a broader competition for transnational investment between cities on both national and regional levels.⁷⁹ He digs into what makes the often unstable field of creative work popular amongst young people, citing that in some part it's due to marketing strategies encouraging entrepreneurialism during the dawn of neoliberalism in the 1980's. But he also sees it as a broader cultural articulation of dissatisfaction with the nature of work at the time, stating that "it would be misguided to dismiss the hunger for free agency as a mere product of market ideology; the flexibility it delivers is a response to an authentic demand for a life not dictated by the cruel grind of

⁷⁹ Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 11.

excessively managed work.”⁸⁰ Autonomy over one’s work and time is attractive to many people—represented quite clearly in the broader popularization of independent and DIY modes of production. But autonomy can only be reconciled with capital’s need for accumulation if autonomous work is attached to systems that place high values on productivity and efficiency. While offering the promise of a more fulfilling, autonomous work/lifestyle, Ross argues that the figure of the creative entrepreneur embraced by policymakers “seems guaranteed merely to elevate this traditionally unstable work profile into an inspirational model for youth looking to make an adventure out of their entry into the contingent labor force.”⁸¹ This changes the nature of media work from one of occupational specialization to one where job flexibility is embraced at the cost of general instability and uncertainty when it comes to being employed and staying employed. Such dynamics intersect well with cities looking for ways to recruit new forms of industry to replace deteriorating manufacturing centers since cities have historically acted as places that absorb such contingencies given the density of options for housing and temporary work.

It’s precisely this twinned sense of freedom and dependence upon personal networks (veiled as a form of community) that I argue intensifies patterns of exclusion, risk, and uneven power dynamics that are typically mapped onto more established screen industries. Susan Christopherson echoes this argument, stating that there are a number of subtle, yet significant changes across new and old media production cultures. The mandate to fit in within informal, yet deeply established, personal networks may even smuggle in more covert forms of exploitation and discrimination since, as Christopherson notes, “[p]ersonal networks are inherently exclusive rather than inclusive, so create nontransparent hierarchies that

⁸⁰ Ibid, 46-47.

⁸¹ Ibid, 17.

potentially hamper professional mobility.”⁸² These opaque hierarchies are often to the disservice of women and people of color regardless of income or educational level, perpetuating an uneven terrain for new media work where women and BIPOC creatives are “paid less than men and are more dependent on a wider range of sources of job information.”⁸³ Often, these informal arrangements favor men who can “rely on the personal ‘old boys’ network to insure continuous employment.” She argues that, particularly in “New York new media,” what matters most is your ability to blend in to the established scenes: “who you know matters almost as much as what you know, and that, in turn, determines the kind of work you get and how steady it is.”⁸⁴

Self-empowering and individualistic discourse around new media work thus seems contradictory to the reality of entrepreneurialism, where an ability to attune oneself to the particularities of local production networks determines success and stable work. Because successful creative workers have to fit into these networks to survive, these pressures promote a sort of homogeneity (whether cultural, racial, or socioeconomic) within new media networks. In similar ways, the urban environments creative workers inhabit also become homogeneously designed, adopting similar aesthetics and purposes until neighborhoods are saturated with businesses like local breweries, trendy coffee shops, and carefully curated street art. In practice, DIY discourse empowers those with the cultural capital to discern and track shifts in DIY trends, market them well, and build exclusive personal networks that help sustain one’s ability to find paid new media work.

⁸² Susan Christopherson, “Project Work in Context: Regulatory Change and the New Geography of Media,” *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 34 (2002): 12.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

The informality of the new media scene—particularly in the “euphoric” indie 1990’s—offered an alternative to the bureaucratic red tape and competition in more formalized or professionalized creative industries. But this informality opened up spaces for more exploitative business and work practices to flourish because of the attractiveness of a meaningful new media career. According to Christopherson, because “no one has a clear fix on wages, working conditions or other terms of employment,” new media workers depend even more intensely on building local knowledge in order to attempt to navigate the informal networks around new media work.⁸⁵ Locating opportunities thus requires a fair amount of economic capital (employment flexibility, enough “free” time to network), but it also requires a lot of cultural capital in order to understand how to inquire about and negotiate new media employment. In fact, Christopherson marks this dependence on local, on-the-ground networks as one of the biggest differences between old media and new media work, arguing that both “employers and workers are almost completely dependent on personal local knowledge in making employment decisions because there are no intermediary organizations to inform employers about a potential worker's credentials and experience.”⁸⁶ In this context, a consumption-oriented celebration of locality and local community seems more like a professional necessity rather than a political commitment to the forms of kinship and community intrinsic to Jacobsian imaginaries of the ideal “urban village.”

The relationship between the figure of the creative professional or creative entrepreneur and a broader authentic urban lifestyle is fleshed out implicitly throughout *Vice* magazine’s broader oeuvre. Issue after issue, the magazine churned out edgy, provocative articles detailing the “do’s and don’ts” of authentic, cool consumption accompanied by

⁸⁵ Ibid, 2015.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 2012.

exuberant Polaroids of youth-filled parties and interspersed with advertisements for urban fashion brands, skateboard companies, music labels, and pornography sites. The creative professional became the explicit subject of an essay published in 2002 titled “Creative Publicity,” in which author Bruce Benderson identifies the new characteristics of what he calls “the Baby Networker phenomenon.” He details what he sees as an enormous shift in the types of labor these new creatives take on, mourning a time when “the cranking out of flyers and invitations, the false patter of cocktail schmoozing, the gossipy jangle of telephones, or a mind for business were all considered alien to the artist’s creativity.”⁸⁷ Through a number of anecdotes, Benderson paints a picture of a multi-tasking, on-the-grind generation of creatives that works hard and plays harder, finding inventive ways to amplify their status and creative work opportunities through participating in gritty underground social circles. Where Benderson sees dilution of space for “real” creative energy, others might read the necessity of boot-strapped independent production networks. In either case, the figure described here (even if vilified) matches what insiders to the scene identify as the energy of new creative work.

Yet, this vilification of the creative professional runs contradictory to VICE’s broader history both within the Williamsburg creative scene and the broader context of new media industries. Analyzing the way that founders Alvi, Smith, and McInnes have told the history of VICE, it is apparent that their success has been precisely because they played “Baby Networker” so well. In a 2016 interview with NPR, Alvi’s description of the company’s founding ethic reveals precisely the types of ambivalent, contradictory politics described in Hymowitz’s article and Banet-Weiser’s broader critique of brand culture. Throughout the

⁸⁷ Bruce Benderson, “Creative Publicity,” *Vice*, 2002.

interview, Alvi details that VICE's "formula for success" was in the owners' commitment to "the spirit of punk rock capitalism" and unearthing underground forms of culture that "alternative magazines weren't covering" through an immersive, authentic perspective.⁸⁸ VICE's ability to embrace these political contradictions in order to channel "rebellious energies" toward politically tinged modes of consumption are the foundation for success in new media work. This political ambivalence has significant impacts on urban space as it reshapes the conditions of creative labor.

Vice magazine participated in popularizing this ambivalent political relationship between urban space, new media work, and creative lifestyles through its reportage. VICE's broader oeuvre of reportage conveyed these types of experiential knowledge, authenticity, and immediacy primarily within three genres of written articles and one column-type form of commentary: highly informal interviews with marginalized people or treasured artists, personal essays, candid photospreads of "do's and don'ts that critiqued street fashion, and the infamous "VICE Guides."

The most prolific of the written genres was the guide. Subsequent creative endeavors, both in print and video, adopted "The VICE Guide" as a signature trope, with titles like *The VICE Guide to Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll*, *The VICE Guide to the World*, and *The VICE Guide to Travel*. In the magazine's first greatest hits volume, "VICE Guides" structure most of the book's content, with guides ranging from sex advice to more heavy topics like drugs, evil, foreign policy, survival in prison, and even happiness. While the magazine in general has been cited in popular discourse as "the bible" for 1990's/early 2000's hipster culture, the VICE Guides in particular offer a glimpse into the neoliberal self-fashioning that

⁸⁸ "VICE: Suroosh Alvi," NPR, 2016.

has proliferated in the age of self-branding, lifestyle marketing, and the aspirational promises of the creative professional career.

By 2006, *Vice* was creating and distributing city guides, primarily focused on hip gentrifying places like Brooklyn, Chicago, Austin, and Los Angeles. In their city guides, they provide maps and lists of destinations, primarily focused on bars and restaurants, as well as tips for staying “in the know” about cool places and ways to act, with little practical or historical information about the broader city. This signals a type of tourist that is unfamiliar with urban space in general, and uninterested in more mainstream touristic endeavors like sight-seeing or visiting major landmarks. Instead, these guides act to rearrange the sensorial frameworks for experiencing urban space towards a type of consumptive experience aligned with Zukin’s concept of “destination culture,” which involves building differentiated forms of consumption and prioritizes attracting unique consumptive experiences for non-residents. The success of such speculative place-making practices is only measured in terms of the financial gains and ability to track higher income residents to a particular area.⁸⁹ Rather than visiting historical sites or tourist attractions, “authentic” travels within these cities involve discovering new, novel experiences that signal mastery over unfamiliar terrain. Most importantly, the city guides reframe urban space as somewhat of a treasure hunt to find “the real” or authentic and to see neighborhoods as landscapes, thereby using authenticity as a horizon for further modes of cultural distinction and exclusion.

For example, “The VICE Guide to New York City” is divided into six sections: “The VICE Guide to New York,” “The VICE Guide to Brooklyn,” “Um... What Else?,” “Strip Clubs, Etc.,” “NYC Field Guide,” and “The Do’s And Don’ts of New York City.” The first

⁸⁹ Zukin, *The Naked City*, 237.

two are lists of bars and restaurants, focused mainly on “the best places to meander.” These, according to the guide, are the East Village, the Lower East Side, and Williamsburg. The reasoning here seems to hinge partly on the hipness of these neighborhoods (the trajectory of loft living moving outward) and partly on their relative proximity to one another. The same is true in the guide to Brooklyn where the article defends its narrow focus on Williamsburg in a similar fashion. According to the article:

There are plenty of other great places in Brooklyn not on the map but why the fuck would you want to trek all the way out there? Coney Island is a change of pace if you live here, but coming all the way to New York for the same white-trash fair that’s in every town is a waste of time. There’s O’Connors in Park Slope and Enid’s over in Greenpoint but there’s nothing else there worth checking out so fuck it. You want areas you can meander all around... Don’t waste your time trying to find some fucking Russian restaurant in Brighton Beach. This trip is about meandering.

Alongside these blatant moves to map “meanderable” space (which I read as coded language for already gentrified), the list also presents a typology of the type of “diversity” gestured towards in the Kokie’s article. In a list entry for Greenpoint Tavern, the article states that “this place is like a ride at Disneyworld with animatronic Williamsburg stereotypes. You have the old Polish dock workers that used to live here before anyone else, Puerto Rican drug dealers scoping out the young girls, broke hipsters who had to leave Manhattan after they graduated from NYU, and crazy black homeless people who believe in outer space. Order a ‘container’ of beer and you’re going to need both hands to carry it.” In a similar fashion to “Please Snort Me,” the city guides generally rely on typifying difference using often racist

stereotypes in a way that demonstrates the writers' mastery over the space, distance from any of the pejorative labels it espouses, and provides a typology of people so the reader can do and feel the same.

The other sections gesture towards various interests and values of Vice's readership when it comes to approaching urban space and non-middle-class culture. Establishing one's difference through knowledge about underground or non-white spaces is an important thread throughout each guide. Through providing a guide to cool and uncool scenes, the VICE Guides reassure readers in their difference from the mainstream while offering advice for demonstrating this knowledge. In the New York City guide in particular, the writers go out of their way to reassure readers and distance their actions from conversations around gentrification. In similar ways as "Please Snort Me," the guide reassures readers that "by the time you're finished reading this a whole other New York has probably come and gone. This is a good thing—you don't have to feel like an outsider here because this place doesn't belong to anybody." Much akin to the disappearance of the "Puerto Rican mamis" and Kokie's Place, massive infrastructural change to formerly working-class, manufacturing-dedicated districts are rendered unfortunate at best and inevitable at worst. Yet, for all the value wrought by this drive to act (or party) like a local in new urban environments, the perspectives of the local, longtime residents to whom the neighborhood did belong before hipsters are not included in these discussions of experiencing places like Williamsburg.

These guides—and the longer trajectory of urban branding—reverse the directionality of what it means to be "local," particularly as forms of urban locality and community were imagined by urban theorists like Jane Jacobs, whose vision of localized urban villages now coexists alongside the presence of major box stores, corporate chains, and luxury high rises.

This is certainly not a new process in New York City and in some ways reflects the persistence of a rebellious, yet bourgeois pursuit of a different kind of lifestyle that stretches back to mid-century cultural changes in New York City. But there also seems to be a difference here in regard to the focus and investment in urban communities from previous iterations of new urban culture, like loft living. In “The VICE Guide to New York City,” there’s little to no mention of art spaces, cultural destinations, powerful people, or small local businesses that seem to characterize the forms of connection espoused within *New York* magazine’s New York City. This New York City seems to be at the expense and disposal (quite literally) of a thrill-seeking audience of young aspiring creatives and entrepreneurs.

But read differently, we can also see these guides as an insider guide to where other cool people might be, in turn where one might meet the connections that could turn into cool, creative work. Thus, media like *Vice* magazine and other “local” underground productions become vital resources for employment, suggesting a movement from an “artistic mode of production model” of cafes and gallery space and towards what I want to propose is a creative mode of production. The creative mode of production builds on some of the crucial infrastructures that produced loft living (i.e. cafes, bars, local eateries, and art galleries), but also necessitates the creation of a somewhat Disneyfied environment of cultivated grittiness that also offers a variety of forms of opulent consumption. These networks are vital to the city’s broader image and its ability to secure investments for further development. Zukin contends that “their life as flexible workers creates a production of leisure and an image of idleness that stage authenticity, helping to make these neighborhoods a cultural destination.”⁹⁰ In this way, flexible, precarious employment helps to also build the types of

⁹⁰ Zukin, *Naked City*, 237.

branded value that eventually give way to higher rents, ultimately pricing underemployed creative workers out of hip neighborhoods.

Thus, in the creative capital model/creative mode of production, locality is something to be conjured and projected, and determined by a broader market hungry for cultural value. Interpretations of a place's past by newcomers or external marketers with an eye for what attracts people to a destination become more valuable precisely because they remake urban space for broader, more affluent publics. These determinations of authenticity differ distinctly from articulations of locality that are forged from the diverse forms of urban community places like Brooklyn used to proudly boast. The young people in Kokie's Place may have been looking for or found this utopic sense of "coming together" in their experiences of late-1990's Williamsburg. However, this type of community, even when readily felt by predominantly white newcomers, obfuscates the differential terrain people occupy in places like Williamsburg, as well as how this differential terrain feeds into broader interpretations of what kinds of creativity constitute Brooklyn's brand and identity.

Whereas manufacturing districts were underfunded, yet affordable to lower-income people and families, the creative mode of production striates space precisely because of its dependence on a highly skilled, yet highly flexible entrepreneurial labor force. Despite narratives that outline the benefits of new media work, in reality these infrastructures are much more exclusionary, unsustainable, and homogenizing than artistic or industrial modes of production. Zukin argues that "unlike factory owners who in the early days of industry built workers' housing near the mill, media firms that hire creative producers have no interest in whether they can afford to live in the trendy neighborhoods where they have set up

shop.”⁹¹ This creates less ownership over formerly affordable or communal/public space while simultaneously masking the necessity of flexibility and housing precarity, proposing these risks as the material costs for choosing a bohemian life of leisure. Popular narratives about the humble beginnings of many new media companies pit these forms of precarity against the now intensified systems of disinvestment from lower-income urban communities.

Not only does the story of Kokie’s Place act as a parable for the ways that creative capital re-shapes spaces and types of urban activity, but it also provides some evidence for the ways that “creativity” begins to do biopolitical work in its capacity to include or exclude people and forms of cultural work. *Vice* magazine and other lifestyle media that determine the “do’s and don’ts” of urban creativity indeed act as gatekeepers for designating legitimate forms of creativity and authenticity. Underneath the surface of its edgy content, the creative networks surrounding *Vice* magazine are still very much influenced by problematic entrepreneurs like Smith, Alvi, and McInnes and “boys club” styles of inclusion, exclusion, and participation. In this vein, creativity becomes a way of managing cultural production and inhabitation of urban space, acting as Angela McRobbie argues as “the site for implementing job creation and, more significantly, labour reform; it is a matter of managing a key sector of the youthful population by turning culture into an instrument of both competition and labour discipline... It is a deployment of power to encourage self-actualization through being creative. It is a matter of putting creativity to work.”⁹² As evidenced by Kokie’s Place, young legitimate creativity is not granted to all who participate—finding a coke bar named Kokie’s Place is a result of one’s “hustle” and skills, but Kokie’s Place’s owners and longtime patrons are a mere backdrop until they violate the terms of Kokie’s “authenticity” through

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 38.

renovation. For McRobbie, the uneven power dynamics over articulations of locality, community, and authenticity rendered by “creative city” policies thus acts as a way to filter out cultural and socioeconomic differences. The result of these large-scale renovations is the proliferation of “cultural homogeneity (albeit with a few gestures to diversity),” established under the cloak of upping the “enjoyment factor” for this creative talent often “at the cost of others whose ‘right to the city’ is now implicitly under question.”⁹³

In other words, the late 1990’s and early 2000’s on the Brooklyn waterfront and across the pages of *Vice* magazine reflected the massification of the creative city urban development model, giving way to a creative mode of production that values “localized” consumption and amenities over investment in community programs and preserving socioeconomic and cultural diversity. Magazines continued to play a large role in mediating taste cultures, desires, and aspirations through lifestyle content. Practices of branding—within individual companies, for individuals, and for broader senses of city brands and forms of identification—were central to both the rise of the Brooklyn brand and its resonances in VICE’s magazine content and company history. Yet, it’s important to acknowledge the falsities in some of the company legends and lore that aims to position VICE Media as a resilient, countercultural, underdog media brand. Although McInnes, Smith, and Alvi sold their brand as the product of “three losers from the crack houses of Montreal,” they were, in fact, all college-educated and came from professional class families who could support their endeavors.⁹⁴ In fact, *Vice* magazine would have never happened were it not for the relative privilege of the founders, who secured initial investment funds from their families (at least

⁹³ Ibid, 49.

⁹⁴ “VICE: The Whole Story.”

\$5000 per household) in order to start the magazine.⁹⁵ The democratic discourses around DIY production, creative work, and independence often obscure similar discrepancies that gesture towards the creative and financial capital necessary to “make it” in creative work. In the next section, I examine how these built-in barriers of entry exacerbated income disparities across urban communities, particularly as DIY cultures were themselves displaced by a booming new media and technology industry.

The Comeup and the Comedown: From DIY and Makers to Innovation Frontier

It would be difficult today to find the type of gritty, unmediated, “eked out sense of freedom” described in “Please Snort Me” in today’s Williamsburg. Landmarks like the Domino Sugar refinery and the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which once distinguished the Brooklyn waterfront as a manufacturing center and distinctly working-class community, have been parceled out to corporations. Alongside a massive (and quite literal) “upscaling” of the city, these distinct markers of Brooklyn’s industrial past have been transformed into either sites for start-up incubation or privately-managed public spaces meant to provide more amenities to the waterfront’s newest residents. Population-wise, the city has expanded in numbers and socioeconomic factors, adding 576,000 new residents between 2005-2016 and increasing the number of households with college degrees from 2% between 1980 and 2000 to 30% in 2006 alone.⁹⁶

Popular discourse around Brooklyn today is awash with criticism of gentrification, but most of this commentary also resolves these criticisms through viewing gentrification as a monolithic, and ultimately inevitable force. Much of these textual representations of what

⁹⁵ “VICE: Suroosh Alvi”

⁹⁶ Trinch and Snajdr, “What the Signs Say.”

gentrification looks like focuses on the choices of individuals, blaming a privileged populace instead of examining the broader structures that make urban living either essential or aspirational. On the surface, this resolve has “improved” the neighborhoods, has created jobs, and has operated similarly well in other historically manufacturing centers that were encountering similar issues of blight, population decline, and lack of resources. Yet, underneath popular representations of creative cities espoused by city-led and business-led marketing campaigns, there runs a critical thread that questions these discourses of success. Primarily headed by BIPOC journalists, community organizations, and academics, they ask: Improvements for whom? And at what cost? As the seemingly overnight success of Brooklyn becomes a model for a wide range of cities across the globe, we should continue to ask: what forms of more radical urban communities have been filtered out or now made impossible to maintain? Which stories get left behind?

Architecturally, the Brooklyn waterfront has been siloed through “innovative designs” that emphasize proximity, convenience, and luxury. Highrise luxury lofts and innovation districts now avidly advertise the amenities and surrounding attractions, measured in distances that can be read as both material and symbolic. Despite having to dedicate some units to affordable housing, these places remain exclusionary through exorbitant prices while attempting to maintain commitments to community contribution. Landlords—commercial and residential alike—use the promise of amenities to charge exorbitant rents, and these amenities also are typically designed to insulate creative professionals from having to venture out to perform tasks, like laundry, exercising, or grocery shopping. Exclusionary structures like luxury apartment complexes and tech campuses enact some of the same segregation tactics as freeway builds, light rail construction, and other forms of spatial violence that have

been shown to tear apart communities for the purpose of convenience and “safety” for upper/middle class residents.

Media play a powerful role in shaping these imaginations for and experiences of forms of urban living. Discussing *Vice* and a handful of other lifestyle magazines similar in tastes and style, Angela McRobbie echoes Greenberg’s call to examine the relationship between media forms like lifestyle magazines and the dynamics of place-making. She argues that “[t]hese cultural gatekeepers [lifestyle magazines] or tastemakers are people whose role is to give unique shape to the consumer landscape of the new culture industries.”⁹⁷ And yet, the unique shape that emerges in places like Williamsburg is both attuned to the production of that locality, but also presents a hyper-mobile model for “improving” lower income neighborhoods facing similar patterns of disinvestment and blight. For McRobbie, the portability of producing locality is best embodied by the figure that characterizes most of *Vice* magazine’s readership—the hipster. She argues that “the figure of the ‘hipster’ embodies this constellation of forces that drives the precise forms taken by these urban economies, differing from place to place, while also registering remarkably similar features, pushing up property values in what were inner city areas, contributing to changes in the retail landscape, presenting an image of artistic activity and upmarket nightlife in the form of cuisine and authentic breweries and so on.”⁹⁸ Similar to *Vice* magazine’s approach to mapping cities described above, the experience of urban space—and its uses, purposes, and values—shift towards recognizable forms of demarcated difference.

While there is a wealth of scholarship on gentrification and urbanization stemming from a variety of disciplines, a closer examination of the relationship between production

⁹⁷ McRobbie, *Be Creative*, 34.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

cultures and media forms can elucidate how the media industries, and dynamics of creative labor more broadly, are complicit in exacerbating forms of spatial inequality. Thinking through how diversity operates within media studies discourse and broader analyses of media diversity, Herman Gray argues that new media have reorganized media cultures surrounding both the production and reception of media texts.⁹⁹ During the Civil Rights era, media representation of BIPOC characters and programming was a significant battleground for activists and community leaders. Today, however, emergent platforms and more accessible recording and distribution technologies have resulted in a monumental shift, where representation of non-white people “is no longer a condition of content scarcity but one of saturation and hypervisibility.”¹⁰⁰ Instead, Gray argues that diversity has been put to work for building up media brands, stating that “the conditions that define the present conjuncture are predicated on the cultural *recognition* of difference, the deployment of diversity as a social practice, and their normative operation as a discourse of management and regulation.”¹⁰¹ Thus, despite a recent saturation of diverse representation, inequality still shapes the types of texts that can be imagined, produced, and circulated. As evidenced by #MeToo, #OscarsSoWhite, and recent conversations around discriminatory or abusive experiences across media and journalistic industries, implicit forms of racism and discrimination continue to create barriers for BIPOC creatives. Twinned economic and social requirements of obtaining a college education and participating in unpaid internships—often necessary for

⁹⁹ Herman Gray, “Precarious Diversity: Representation and Demography,” in *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor*, Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, eds. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 248.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

also managing social expectations and weeding out “bad” cultural fits—also underline the inaccessibility of creative forms of work for lower-income communities.

Gray’s arguments suggest that media scholarship should look beyond matters of representation when it comes to studying diversity and social inequality, which should extend into exploring dimensions of spatial inequality as creative labor expands and doubles down on an urban labor force. While creative labor (particularly related to film and television production) has historically had a complicated relationship with urban and metropolitan areas, screen industries have more recently become deeply entangled with the politics of urban space. Domestically, new and old media capitals have emerged in New York City, Chicago, Atlanta, San Francisco, and New Orleans (among a variety of up-and-coming metropolitan areas in the Midwestern and Southern United States), thereby redistributing the flows of creative work formerly concentrated in screen media capitals like Los Angeles. With this redistribution of creative capital, a highly mobile form of place-making in urban locations within the space of lifestyle magazines emerged and were only exacerbated by the development of further Web 2.0 platforms, which began to look to digitally oriented creative hubs like the Brooklyn waterfront as the clearing ground for the integration of new and so-called “old” media. The two competing old and new media capitals of Hollywood and Silicon Valley, respectively, saw an opportunity for convergence in the talent-dense, but still relatively cheap, neighborhoods of Williamsburg and DUMBO. As Sharon Zukin notes, the relatively small networks of artists and other creatives drawn to Williamsburg in the 1990’s expanded rapidly during the early 2000’s, and by 2005, “[l]ocal media that were initially developed by and for insiders—alternative weekly newspapers, photocopied broadsheets, wiki, and blogs—were cannibalized by the mainstream media, which were hungry for

content.”¹⁰² Thus, a development model geared towards image-making over public service provision, an emergent market for authentic products and creative goods, and a broader media industrial context looking for cheap, niche content and creative talent converged on the Brooklyn waterfront to facilitate Williamsburg’s rise as new media capital. As Zukin contends, “[t]hrough the outreach of the media Williamsburg crystallized into an identifiable local product for global cultural consumption: authentic Brooklyn cool.”¹⁰³

This product attracted not only the attention of other key indie market players like Harvey Weinstein (bidding for the lot that would eventually become Steiner Studios), but it also rendered visible a cheap development option for private-public collaborations as models for rebuilding the outer boroughs. As discussed earlier, the shift towards urban branding presents an easier option for cash-strapped districts precisely because it transfers the burden of development and job generation onto private interests, real estate developers, and affordable re-branding tactics, such as providing subsidies for new business ventures to build the community’s cultural, technological, and vocational infrastructures. Yet, handing over such power over community design to corporations with few connections to long-term residents or lower-income households creates tension between grassroots, equitable community development initiatives and more profit-driven development models, particularly when it comes to land.

Just south of Williamsburg, the recent large-scale development projects pursued at the Brooklyn Navy Yard showcase these disparities. The Navy Yard’s history in relation to Brooklyn history is long and complex—from booming shipbuilding hub to potential garbage incinerator location and designated Superfund site. Yet, by the 1990’s, many smaller

¹⁰² Zukin, *Naked City*, 45.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

manufacturing and distribution businesses began renting parts of the vast complex of buildings from the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation, who controlled the site for the city since 1980.¹⁰⁴ By 1999, interest in leasing space within the Navy Yard increased, particularly given its affordability and 240-acre spread, its proximity to the emergent (and quickly crowded) Williamsburg scene, and its accessibility to Manhattan. Investment capital from a variety of sectors, including reports of Robert de Niro and Harvey Weinstein/Miramax, began to eye the space as a site for the first domestic major film and media studio facility outside of Hollywood.¹⁰⁵ The offer of a 70-year lease on fifteen acres of land directly across from Manhattan from Mayor Rudy Giuliani fell through for Weinstein, but was picked up quickly by real estate developer Doug Steiner, who successfully opened the studio in 2004. Soon after in 2005, broader swaths of the Brooklyn waterfront were rezoned to include residential use, resulting in a frenzy of construction (and opposition to high-rise construction in particular) across Brooklyn's waterfront neighborhoods.¹⁰⁶

Despite the rhetoric of success surrounding these new ventures, print coverage of Navy Yard developments suggests that the broader community imagined different uses for the space. In 1996, El Puente president Luis Garden Acosta presented that part of the site should be made into affordable, multicultural housing in order to bridge community divides between Hasidic and Latinx households in Williamsburg.¹⁰⁷ City Councilmember Kenneth K. Fisher suggested the site might be a good space to relocate Williamsburg local businesses

¹⁰⁴ Rachele Garbarine, "Real Estate: Navy Yard A Haven for Small Users," *New York Times*, 3 July 1991.

¹⁰⁵ Alisa Perren, *Indie Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012), 226; Sharon Zukin, *The Innovation Complex: Cities, Tech, and the New Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 141.

¹⁰⁶ For more in-depth discussion on Steiner Studios, see Zukin, *The Innovation Complex*, 139-165.

¹⁰⁷ Samini Sengupta, "Neighborhood Report: Development; Community Consensus on Navy Yard: Yes on Housing, No on Trash," *New York Times*, 21 January 1996.

needing more space, thereby freeing up space in Williamsburg for more housing.¹⁰⁸ Other community members argued that whatever was built there should be in line with community interest in providing more affordable housing for surrounding areas and providing job opportunities for current surrounding residents, who for the most part resided in public housing around the Navy Yard.¹⁰⁹ Despite many vocal opinions within the community, however, these visions for the Navy Yard did not come to fruition. Instead, the Navy Yard is now home to what Sharon Zukin has called an “innovation complex”—a term that captures the ways that urban innovation districts involve both massive material and symbolic changes in order to make way for creativity and innovation.¹¹⁰ While Zukin’s text aims to complicate the swiftness and inevitability implied by terms like innovation or gentrification, her work also highlights how these long-trenched battles between stakeholders with widely disparate levels of resources exacerbate existing inequalities, particularly within neighborhoods or districts “designed” for innovation and creativity like the Brooklyn waterfront.

Dock 72 presents a good example for how these inequalities emerge both symbolically and materially. A hulking, uniquely designed structure, Dock 72 is a 675,000-square-foot office building constructed of floor-to-ceiling glass walls that describes itself as “the home of 21st century manufacturing in the digital age – a laboratory for the production of ideas and innovation.”¹¹¹ The promotional materials on Dock 72’s website reimagine the history of the Navy Yard by filtering it through the lenses of authenticity and innovation, re-branding the Brooklyn waterfront’s manufacturing past as one that housed “200 Years of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Zukin, *The Innovation Complex*, ix.

¹¹¹ “The Building,” Dock 72 webpage (dock72.com).

Makers.”¹¹² The site pitches the Navy Yard to potential clients, visitors, and investors as a place that “no longer builds ships,” but instead builds ideas.¹¹³ The site claims that the Navy Yard’s “rows of brick buildings have become incubators for Brooklyn’s fast-growing creative industry,” describing the Navy Yard’s 330 companies and 7,000 employees as a populace “whose ranks include artists and designers, metalworkers and coffee roasters, robotics engineers and rooftop farmers. The Navy Yard is home to Steiner Studios, as well as NYC’s oldest whiskey distillery.”¹¹⁴ While citing the new complex’s list of employment opportunities, it’s difficult to ignore the classed nature of “21st century manufacturing in the digital age.” From coffee shops to distilleries to rooftop gardens, this list of occupations prioritizes networks of consumption and production that feed and foster a creative capitalist class and bolster an economy of speculative real estate projects, often at the expense of broader community needs that might be less profitable for investors, such as affordable public housing. Despite stated commitments to equity and community development, such as Dock 72’s diversity and internship initiatives and living-wage guarantees, these efforts hardly address the pipelines meticulously built between tech-driven creative corporations and surrounding universities, which narrow employment opportunities for a wider, more diverse population. The way these structures are built materially and culturally into urban planning and development initiatives have material effects on senses of inclusion and exclusion amongst long-time and incoming residents.

Yet, most businesses taking up residence in Brooklyn in the past decade carry a sense of responsibility and hometown pride for their Brooklyn neighborhood. Dock 72 even

¹¹² “The Navy Yard,” Dock 72 webpage (dock72.com).

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

dedicates an entire page on their website to “The Neighborhood,” citing the Navy Yard and broader “Brooklyn Tech Triangle” as being “surrounded by the best of Brooklyn.”¹¹⁵

Considering the waterfront area is only a small portion of the entire borough, this seems like a bold claim; one built out of the re-branding efforts endorsed by the city since the 1970’s.

The tension rises here between locality, as produced by longtime residents, and a more commercial, branded locality, embodied by Dock 72’s discourse and produced for an outward market. In re-designing “Brooklyn” for innovation, private-public deals between government and speculative capital enclose the availability of truly public space and demonstrate the ease by which a creative capital market enfolds and encloses more equitable arrangements of life and labor. Intentions aside, creative communities built by boot-strapping young entrepreneurs priced out of SoHo and the Lower East Side also facilitated this shift in symbolic and material infrastructure. Insider media texts that provided insight into the worlds built by artists staged a new kind of authenticity and aspirational model in the figure of a creative lifestyle. Local and city development offices then leveraged these changes as a solution to a former manufacturing district’s decline, fostering public-private partnerships and subsidizing businesses’ expenses in order to create a set of “new manufacturing” neighborhoods out of the bones and remains of Brooklyn’s more working-class communities.

Turning to *Vice* magazine, one can see these tensions between local and global interests rise as the relative visibility of Williamsburg—and the broader Brooklyn waterfront—as a global creative capital increased from the late 1990’s to the early 2000’s. Two stories involving *Vice* magazine during the era of the Brooklyn waterfront’s transformation from so-called “death and drugs alley” to luxury cultural destination

¹¹⁵ “The Neighborhood,” Dock 72 webpage (dock72.com).

showcase the rapid changes that occurred over the span of ten years and persist today. They also display both the deeper ironies of Williamsburg's rise to "innovation hub" status and the externalities of this meteoric change in both physical and socioeconomic environment. Mostly, it shows a story where artists build value for a place out of necessity (thanks to systems of disinvestment), coexisting with longtime residents but not really integrating with or advocating for longtime residents' visions for the neighborhood. By the early 2000's, Williamsburg's visibility within creative networks resulted in waves of displacement: first, forcing out the small- to medium-manufacturing businesses that still provided employment for the neighborhood's working class communities by predatory landlords looking to sell cheap space to artists in exchange for little landlord responsibility; then, displacing low-income artists through the elevated rents their presence engenders, followed by the cannibalization of these informally built creative nodes by corporations and real estate investors searching for the next innovation frontier (or potential site for an innovation complex).

Vice magazine plays a key role in these waves within the changing social fabric of Williamsburg and Brooklyn more broadly. While the company's move to New York City was facilitated by an investor who profited from the dot-com boom in 2000 and intended to bundle and sell off the magazine eventually for its intellectual property, it was also the failure of Szalwinski's pressure to rapidly scale and diversify VICE Media as a company that laid the groundwork for VICE's movement from print magazine to multimedia brand.¹¹⁶ Despite the fact that the dot-com bust and Szalwinski's mismanagement of VICE's budget to the point of almost closure, it was also this event that forced Alvi, Smith, and McInnes to

¹¹⁶ "VICE: Suroosh Alvi."

relocate to Brooklyn. Working out of some unused space in one of their advertising clients' manufacturing space (a streetwear brand called Triple 5 Soul), *Vice* magazine began again in Williamsburg. Being in the mix of the frenetic energies of the Williamsburg DIY scene in the early 2000's, *VICE Media* actually came of age as a media company because of its founders' integration into the Williamsburg underground scene.

As *VICE* expanded, it capitalized on its ability to disseminate and brand urban creativity for economic gain. Originally, *Vice* magazine was only distributed in small skate shops and streetwear retail stores, trading free advertisements with little censorship for distribution space. Many photo features during this era of the magazine showcased this energy and lifestyle—parties that often featured casual, drug use, nudity, and other underground scenes of weird encounters or typically censored material documented with polaroid or digital cameras. It gives the photographs an authentic feel—as if one were really there—offering visual evidence of the type of “eked out freedom” memorialized in “Please Snort Me” and described in the short blurbs describing the atmospheres of particular bars and venues featured in the city guides.

Where *Vice* magazine succeeded and outlived other smaller, DIY magazines or avoided being bought out by larger publishing houses was in its ability to utilize its cache within Williamsburg and Brooklyn to broker deals with larger media companies, like CNN, YouTube, and MTV/Viacom. The confluence of *VICE Media*'s quick rise to multimedia empire and Brooklyn's own meteoric changes mirror each other, reflecting a deeper imbrication between shifts in media and cultural production cultures and the spaces where postindustrial productivity and creativity are deemed to take shape. By 2005, the Brooklyn waterfront was set to rezone and redevelop large areas of former manufacturing space to

make way for mixed-use buildings and high-rise apartments. By 2007, as documented by VICE's own video "Toxic: Brooklyn," multi-million-dollar apartments were under construction throughout Williamsburg-Greenpoint. Landlords were already utilizing eviction tactics, such as conducting construction while residents continued to live in rental buildings or through raising rents or cancelling contracts with small manufacturing businesses, to clear buildings for gutting and remodeling for luxury apartment rentals.¹¹⁷ Similarly, *Vice* magazine began expanding beyond their web and editorial content by pursuing their own video production in the mid 2000's. In 2006—just one year after the first YouTube video was uploaded—VICE had leveraged a DVD deal with MTV to create the *VICE Guide to Travel*, brokered a feature deal for these videos for CNN's website, and used those deals to begin a partnership with YouTube to develop web series for their own VICE YouTube channel.¹¹⁸ VICE's location within Brooklyn's creative hub both facilitated the creative energy and talent needed to accomplish these ambitious expansions and proved valuable for their rise in notoriety amongst media industries and popular culture. The dynamic mix of underground cultural production, young entrepreneurs, and illicit activities provided by this new location inspired more youth-oriented content that focused specifically on documenting and translating the new urban experience for readers.

VICE Media's simultaneous journey of re-branding and expansion tracks well with the subsequent waves of artists and investment capital described earlier in this section. The transition from welfare-funded indie magazine to global multimedia "empire" showcases how success or survival in tech/new media often comes with constant industry repositioning

¹¹⁷ VBS, "Toxic: Brooklyn," Video, 2007.

¹¹⁸ Robert Levine, "A Guerrilla Video Site Meets MTV," *The New York Times*, 19 November 2007; David Carr, "Inviting In a Brash Outsider," *New York Times*, 14 February 2010; Reeves Weidman, "A Company Built on a Bluff," *New York*, 10 June 2018.

and adaptation, both of which VICE Media was able to do because of its strategic location amongst a network of up-and-coming creative professionals. The creative energy and flexible work schedules of a hipster, loft-living lifestyle provided a network of hip, cheap, and talented creatives to provide constant streams of content. Yet, it was VICE's willingness to trade in their cache on cool for investment or content deals with larger, established media conglomerates like Disney, CNN, and 21st Century Fox, as well as budding new media giants like YouTube, that facilitated their ability to outlast similar endeavors and expand into different revenue streams. The professionalization of these networks and start-up, DIY culture more broadly through their rise in cultural and economic status thus presents a broader transition from a somewhat differently politically aligned "artistic mode of production" model, one driven by what I'm identifying is the creative mode of production, which encourages flexibility, precarity, and highly individualized forms of "creative" expression embodied in the figure of the creative entrepreneur.

VICE Media, and the complex of media and tech businesses it paved the way for, is thus a more complicit actor behind the drastically changed landscape of Williamsburg today than the semi-legal loft tenets of the area's DIY scene. Moving more locally, a different story involving *Vice* magazine and the Brooklyn waterfront reveals significant changes in VICE's relationship with the indie/DIY scene. When VICE moved its headquarters to a complex of buildings on Kent Ave. on the waterfront, it was presented as a sign of the company's vitality throughout many trade and popular presses. Yet, the broader discourse within local blogs and publications blames VICE's expansion for "cannibalizing" iconic Williamsburg destinations and artistic institutions. The gap between these two representations of VICE's relationship to

Williamsburg showcases how the young company leveraged its own recognition as a “Bad Boy Brand” to buy out spaces built by artists over the course of a decade.

After almost a decade of noise, art, and rock and roll, the DIY communal living space, music venue, and guitar peddle manufacturing shop, Death by Audio (DBA), closed its doors on November 22, 2014.¹¹⁹ During the weekend-long farewell concert series and art installation put on by its crew, tensions between the old and new occupants came to a head. Multiple episodes of flooding and damage occurred as the new tenants’ construction crew began work on converting the space into a “freaky space-utopia” of office suites to house VICE’s expanding media production. The artists attempting to give the iconic space a proper farewell voiced their frustration in the ways available and most familiar to them—artistic property defacement. Much of ire of the spray-painted rogue exhibition was directed towards VICE and its role in transforming the neighborhood from artist-gentrified enclave to innovation capital primed for wealthier young creative professionals. As captured in *Goodnight Brooklyn!*, a 2016 documentary directed by DBA’s Matthew Conboy that documents the humble beginnings and chaotic final days of the venue, the conflict between VICE and underground music venues like DBA, Glasslands, 285 Kent, and The Muse circus school reached its climax when one muralist painted a rudimentary “Fuck You Shane” on one of the walls. A group of thuggish security guards appeared almost immediately and began restricting traffic to many parts of the building.¹²⁰

This “Fuck You Shane”—referring to VICE’s founder and CEO Shane Smith—was the Williamsburg art community’s way of responding to the second wave of gentrification

¹¹⁹ Allan Kozinn, “Death By Audio to Close in November,” *New York Times*, 8 September 2014, artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/08/death-by-audio-to-close-in-november/.

¹²⁰ *Goodnight Brooklyn!: The Story of Death by Audio* (dir. Matthew Conboy, USA, 2016).

that had taken hold of and changed the neighborhood. It reverberated across the indie press and local blogs, with outlets like *Brooklyn Paper*, *Brooklyn*, *Bedford + Bowery*, and even the *New York Times* placing blame squarely on VICE—and the company’s dealings with the block of buildings’ landlords—for “displacing Brooklyn institutions.”¹²¹ Throughout *Goodnight Brooklyn!* and the broader press articles covering the transition runs a theme of greed and landlord manipulation tactics.

Despite celebration of the DIY, multi-tasking indie scene throughout the 2000’s, the amateur nature of these nascent businesses was ultimately exploited by landlords, who leveraged the networks built by tenants to pursue deals with real estate investors or corporations like VICE. The informally gained business knowledge of indie ventures like DBA seemed to be specifically targeted, using now-rampant eviction tactics such as denying tenants’ rights to live in loft spaces, withholding and doctoring leases, refusing to renew leases, charging exorbitant late payment fees and fines, and performing extensive construction on still-occupied buildings. One can only conclude that if this symbolizes how (white) creative talent with a significant amount of name recognition and community support can be forcibly removed to make way for “innovative” capital investment, the eviction tactics used on homeowners, longtime renters with rent stabilization, or minority-owned businesses are assuredly even more predatory. Thus, despite the discourse proposing creative work as an equalizing force during the 2000’s, the story of VICE’s displacement and cannibalization of key nodes in creative networks contends that a new creative capital model/creative mode of production depends on expendability for innovation.

¹²¹ Nicole Disser, “Death By Audio’s Edan Wilber On What Happened With Vice and What’s Next,” *Bedford + Bowery*, 5 December 2014.

The frustrations surrounding VICE's buyout of the buildings that housed a long list of culturally significant performance and gallery spaces resulted in peaceful protests of the company's presence on the Brooklyn waterfront. A number of Williamsburg artists and members of the community attempted to "levitate" the new VICE offices into the river in retaliation for its role in "displacing" the youth culture that made them popular and in an attempt to make this act of displacement known.¹²² *Vice* magazines were gathered in a large pile and burned in front of VICE's offices, echoing the violation sensed by DBA founder Edan Wilber in an interview for *Bedford + Bowery*. Commenting on his feelings towards VICE after DBA closed, Wilber highlights the hypocrisy of the entire encounter with VICE, stating "I'm sure you saw photos of all the shredded *Vice* magazines at the last show. But the fuckin' funny thing is, that was Matt [Conboy] and my personal collection of *Vice* magazines from the mid-2000s."¹²³ Wilber goes on to reflect on the sense of violation by a peer independent business venture, stating that *Vice* magazine "*was* such a rad thing. It was one of the first magazines I found when I moved to New York... It was one of the first out-there, awesome things I'd found. I was a fan for a long time... it was just one of those things I did have respect for because I thought they were doing something out-there and different, but it's just the same now. It's become corporatized."¹²⁴

Other residents leaving the Kent Ave. block of buildings slated to become VICE Media's global headquarters, like Glasslands, 285 Kent, the Muse circus school, also blamed VICE for the landlords' termination of their rental contracts. Each of the tenants voiced their

¹²² Jackson Connor, "Demonstrators Tried to Levitate Vice Media's Headquarters into the East River (Seriously)," *The Huffington Post*, 4 March 2015.; Jordan Sargent, "No One Wants to Say It, But Vice Is Displacing Brooklyn Institutions," *Gawker*, 22 October 2014.

¹²³ Disser, "Death By Audio's Edan Wilber On What Happened With Vice."

¹²⁴ Ibid.

frustration with VICE Media's take-over, with many stating that immediate construction projects that caused structural damage and floating debris made it impossible to even stay through the ends of their leases. Death By Audio's loft flooded, causing damage to musical instruments and sound equipment, while the Muse claimed that renovations caused "pieces of the ceiling to fall, narrowly missing students practicing tumbling and aerial acrobatics."¹²⁵ Despite these feelings of betrayal and loss, most of the institutions "displaced" by VICE Media were able to relocate to other gritty, creative neighborhoods, either within Brooklyn or in the abandoned industrial landscapes of Midwestern metropolises like Detroit. This type of expulsion from established spaces thus disperses creative talent, thus beginning processes of network establishment, renewal, and eventual further displacement anew.

While the stories discussed above vilify VICE as a key piece in the unstoppable force of gentrification, few participants in the blogs and popular press stop to question what material processes actually contributed to gentrification.¹²⁶ Much of the discourse around urban displacement in Williamsburg centers artists, ignoring waves of small manufacturing businesses relocating outward to the suburbs that happened so that mostly vacant manufacturing buildings could be made available to artists. Beyond Winifred Curran's careful analysis of the central role *industrial* (rather than residential) displacement played in Williamsburg's shifting demographics, there's little attention to the ways that creative capital from its outset is sanctioned by both private and public interests. VICE Media's headquarters relocation involved a significant investment from the company, but the move was also

¹²⁵ Danielle Furfaro, "Circus School Owner: Vice Construction Sending Debris Tumbling Onto Tumblers," *Brooklyn Paper*, 6 November 2014.

¹²⁶ Matthew Conboy, "'Goodnight Brooklyn': How Vice Media Killed Death By Audio," *The Daily Beast*, 3 December 2016. Although this particular article is written by the documentary's director, the narrative presented in countless other articles addressing DBA's closure reflect this sentiment.

supported by an offered \$6.5 million dollar tax credit through New York's Empire State Development.¹²⁷ Its previous location at 90 N. 11 Street in North Williamsburg has since been torn down to make way for more retail space and offices.¹²⁸ What this suggests is a broader reassessment of cultural value (who matters in these decisions about the uses of space?) and replacement of entire modes of production, along with the forms of living they engender.

Conclusion: Immaterial Labor's Material Costs

The slippage of terms around the knowledge economy might have begun with re-shaping notions of culture and creativity, but it's seeped into the re-branding of "manufacturing" work writ large—Brooklyn's waterfront "innovation hub" now houses structures dedicated to "factories" for the "production of ideas and innovation." My argument here is that studying *Vice* magazine's aesthetic approach, company discourse, and brand formation gives insight into the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist forms of work and the desires, aspirations, and affects that surround such immaterial work. *Vice* magazine as a case study displays how culture, ideas about diversity, independence, and difference, feed into a rather all-encompassing vision that smuggles in older, entrenched power dynamics, while simultaneously letting those inequities guide the social rules, tastes, and aspirations within creative networks. The magazine—and its broader readership in the 1990's and early 2000's—presented a new relationship to urban space, which became a lucrative set of cultural practices with resonances that shape and are shaped by broader structural changes, from city branding campaigns to clever marketing initiatives. In each case, culture is

¹²⁷ Mark Fahey, "Vice Media Grows in Brooklyn," *Crain's New York Business*, 2 July 2014.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

operationalized for capitalistic ends, building unsustainable and highly commercial imaginaries around urban living and creative work. Of course, not all participants in these scenes followed this logic explicitly, yet their mere presence—and the cultural forms they produce and distribute—has become a tool for widespread displacement and enclosure of equitable space.

Thus, expanding the creative capital model as a low-cost way to improve urban communities acts as a double-edged sword of exclusion. For longtime residents of underfunded areas, maintaining the livability of the neighborhood for a wide variety of socioeconomic situations is not the priority for transnational investment companies who receive the most support from private-public development projects. For prospective residents, the ties between new media hubs, low-paid entry work, and soaring costs of living furthermore have raised the barrier of entry higher than for creative entrepreneurs/young professional—the ability to find affordable enough of a living space in the saturated downtown cores makes entering into this creative network even more difficult for those without significant economic means. What this means in terms of the diversity of production cultures is that, while extensively showcasing racial, ethnic, and sexual diversity, the inequality of new media work privileges those who can have, make, or buy the right connections, reinforcing the very opaque hierarchies that emerged during the nascent stages of digital work. It also hands over a tremendous amount of responsibility to individuals navigating this industry as the informality of creative work in places like Williamsburg bolstered promises of community and collaboration, while maintaining a necessary level of precarity and risk facilitated by shifting power structures in the broader media and tech industries. These conditions—and their bait and switch of relative freedom at the cost of

insecurity—are only now, twenty years later, being challenged by new media workers who find their only protection from the instability of platform dependence is to unionize.¹²⁹

In this chapter, I have shown how new media work gives way to a new set of urban infrastructures that attempt to build semblances of “an urban village” for a precariously employed labor force. Cities become vital infrastructures for the high risks built into new media work due to their historical entanglements with modes of flexible or informal of labor. Urban studies scholar Joachim Thiel contends that the rhetoric around creative cities obfuscates the real conditions for creativity’s relationship with urban life, stating that it is in fact “not mainly due to favourable conditions for cultural production but, above all, because cities provide mechanisms to *compensate uncertainties*.”¹³⁰ These new orientations to urban space are inherently exclusive of many and spatially violent for longtime residents of the neighborhoods in which they take root. *Vice* magazine as a case study offers insights into some of the industrial and affective dynamics at play, from the channeling of “rebellious energies” into forms of market value to the “coming together in really weird ways” that reflect underlying desires for community and authenticity.

¹²⁹ Dave McNary, “Vice Media Video Employees Unionize With Writers Guild East and Editors Guild,” *Variety*, 21 September 2017; Mark Sweney, “Vice UK Staff Move to Unionise to ‘Share in the Success’ of Media Company,” *The Guardian*, 8 February 2016.

¹³⁰ Joachim Thiel, “Creative Cities and the Reflexivity of the Urban Creative Economy,” *European Urban and Regional Studies* 24, no. 1 (2017): 22.

Chapter Two

The VICE Guide to Speculative Markets: A Crisis Historiography of Digital Video Economies' "Messy Middle" and the Rise of Viral News

Two moments illustrate the meteoric rise and fall of digital-first publishers during the 2010's. The first showcases the promise of a new journalism born out of the utopian ideals of digital culture. In 2014, a Pew Research report found that digitally-born news and culture companies like VICE were at the forefront of new efforts to revitalize an ailing journalism industry, with millennial-focused new media companies alone adding 3000 new journalism jobs to a highly competitive market and boosting investments in foreign reporting bureaus.¹ The report finds that increasing news presence on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Google's YouTube, led to a rising social distribution network for news content, citing that nearly 50% of U.S. adults shared news pieces or discussed news stories on social media that year.² Simultaneously, VICE's brash, immersionist brand of youth-focused journalism reached its peak in 2014. Despite fielding waves of criticism for its brand of "stunt journalism," VICE secured a \$2.5 billion valuation while winning the brand's first Emmy, Peabody, and Knight Foundation Innovation Award.³ From VICE's perspective, this spoke to their ability to tap into the interest of global millennial culture, a generation who searched for a new guard in news and cultural content. Specifically, VICE's financial success signaled a market for "authentic" news, or (according to VICE) a type of news that was raw, independent, and antithetical to traditional journalistic norms of objectivity, critical distance, and talking head interviews with experts.

¹ Monica Anderson and Andrea Caumont, "How Social Media Is Reshaping News," *Pew Research Center*, September 24, 2014.

² Ibid.

³ Television Academy, "Vice," <https://www.emmys.com/shows/vice>.

The second moment shows an industry in freefall. By 2017, digital publishing giants VICE, BuzzFeed, Vox, Mic, and more began what would become multiple rounds of extensive layoffs, revealing desperate attempts to regain profitability and a looming collapse. In what the new VICE Union would later term “a macabre annual ritual,” hundreds of journalists and media workers working across legacy publications and digital news start-ups were let go each year as management struggled to find a business model that worked in an increasingly monopolized digital advertising market.⁴ While VICE reached an all-time high valuation of \$5.7 billion in 2017, the company declared bankruptcy while competitor BuzzFeed closed its news division for good in 2023.⁵

At the heart of this meteoric rise and fall of what Edward Hurcombe, Jean Burgess, and Stephen Harrington have called *social news* companies is a broader contention with the role that social media platforms played in both driving their successes and, ultimately, failures to “innovate” the news industry for a digital-first audience.⁶ Many criticized digital publishers’ dependency on social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube as distribution portals for their news content, while others blamed the companies’ reliance on venture capital, exorbitant spending, and staggering executive salaries for creating unsustainable business models built on rapid scale.⁷ For years, journalists working for social

⁴ “Vice Media’s Shane Smith to Receive Knight Innovation Award on Dec. 1 at CUNY Media Innovation Summit,” Knight Foundation, October 24, 2014.

⁵ Jill Abramson, “Why BuzzFeed and Vice Couldn’t Make News Work,” *Vanity Fair*, May 5, 2023; Lauren Hirsch and Benjamin Mullin, “Vice, Decayed Digital Colossus, Files for Bankruptcy,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 2023.; Margaret Sullivan, “Vice Is Going Bankrupt, BuzzFeed News Is Dead. What Does It Mean?” *The Guardian*, May 16, 2023.

⁶ Edward Hurcombe, Jean Burgess, and Stephen Harrington. “What’s Newsworthy About ‘social News’? Characteristics and Potential of an Emerging Genre.” *Journalism (London, England)* 22, no. 2 (2021): 378–394. They define it more as a genre of news, but here I’m using this definition to make a more precise argument about social news as an emergent “hybrid” type of company that emerged in response to crises in definitions around news and crises in news funding models sparked by the rise of social media platforms as news distributors.

⁷ See, for example, Hirsch and Mullen, “Vice, Decayed Digital Colossus.”

news companies had experienced growing job insecurity as start-up minded companies like VICE changed focus and staffing to fit the mercurial decisions of platform companies like Facebook. Notoriously, a Facebook-driven “pivot to video,” in which hundreds of journalists were laid off to ramp up video production and editing staff as Facebook shifted its Newsfeed toward video, became a common refrain for predicting restructuring and layoffs across the sector.⁸ Across the board, dependencies on social media platforms and a monopolized digital ad market were consistently cited in postmortems describing the reasons behind these companies’ collapse. However, these reasons—while telling of broader internal issues attached to speculative media economies and start-up culture more broadly—offer thin, presentist explanations that miss the deeper history behind the causes and effects of these companies’ quick rise to power and demise.

While social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook played a large role in these companies’ distribution strategies and various pivots during the 2010’s, a closer look into VICE’s history reveals that there were deeper institutional and structural crises underlying news and entertainment industries alike. Cable and broadcast networks were losing audiences to the internet while cable giants were simultaneously squeezing television writers, leading to a historic 100-day WGA writers’ strike in 2007. During this time, many struggling entertainers and creatives took to the internet to expand their possibilities and challenge television norms.⁹ Print news organizations also experienced massive losses in ad revenue to Google search and digital advertising, while television news ratings stalled due to growing

⁸ Peter Kafka, “Here’s Why Publishers Won’t Stop Pivoting to Video,” *Vox*, August 17, 2017; Heidi N. Moore, “The Secret Cost of Pivoting to Video,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, September 26, 2017; Cale Guthrie Weissman, “Here’s An Abridged Timeline Of Digital Media’s Pivot To Video,” *Fast Company*, February 21, 2018.; John West, “Publishers Are Desperately Pivoting to Video—but They Should Be Standing up to Facebook,” *Quartz*, July 26, 2017.

⁹ Patrick Vonderau, “Writers Becoming Users: YouTube Hype and the Writer’s Strike,” in *The YouTube Reader*, eds. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009): 109-125.

criticism of “the corporate media” and political bias following their controversial coverage of the so-called Wars on Terror. Unilateral reporters, citizen journalists, activists, and political bloggers harnessed the freedom of blogs to contest dominant news narratives, signaling a broader loss of authority for global television news brands like CNN.¹⁰ Meanwhile, social media giants like Google/YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter were just getting off the ground in 2006. The rise of social media in this complex tangle of disruption by internet technologies and businesses both held radical promises for a more inclusive creative economy and challenged the monolithic power of a concentrated media industry. In other words, the mid-2000’s represented a critical juncture point for a wide swath of media industries, and the meteoric rise of VICE from indie magazine to digital news innovator spoke to a broader crisis in media authority and control, including debates about journalistic authority and the future of television.

Born out of the vacuum between faltering mainstream news and entertainment companies and the digitally-enabled creative networks that emerged out of the rise of the internet (as unpacked in the previous chapter), this chapter argues that companies like VICE participated in creating a speculative bubble around news—specifically video news—content that further troubled the boundaries between news and entertainment content. Specifically, I outline four crises that converged to create the space for the bubble. The first involved the crises mentioned above around media authority and industry structure. The entrance of citizen journalists, activist media networks, political bloggers, and other tangential actors in the field of news challenged mainstream institutions’ authority and created space for

¹⁰ Lindsay Palmer notes these as reasons why networks like CNN experimented with incorporating user-generated content to cover global news stories in a quicker and cheaper fashion. See, Lindsay Palmer, “‘IReporting’ an Uprising: CNN and Citizen Journalism in Network Culture,” *Television & New Media* 14, no 5 (2013): 367-385.

emergent news genres and styles beyond the confines of corporate-owned news media to circulate online. These changes—often embodied by the rise of Indymedia networks—were often applauded as promising avenues for building more bottom-up, grassroots networks that contested the corporate interests within spaces like CNN.¹¹ Yet, the entrance of new genres, modes, and players within the terrain of cultural production also played a significant role in creating a crisis in the dominant industry structure, destabilizing the boundaries around markets for news and entertainment. In the news sector, these conditions stoked the rise of various tech-driven or hyperpartisan media ventures with aspirations for influence and profit. These tensions spilled over into further destabilizations around digital advertising and distribution, in which the crises in distribution models for news and entertainment content and their attached advertising and funding models were further vexed by a widescale crisis regarding the value and worth of digital metrics.

This chapter examines the relationship between platform power, crises in dominant media industries, and the rise of digital-first media companies like VICE by attending to its industrial positioning throughout the 2010's. Journalism and critical media studies scholars today are contending with the ways that these various destabilizations have created an environment in which news has been further commodified and subordinated to the commercial imperatives of social media networks. In particular, the rise of alternative journalism networks on YouTube and their branded alternative politics has been criticized for stoking an economy for hyperpartisan and populist information ecologies.¹² This chapter

¹¹ See, for example: Nick Couldry and James Curran, "The Paradox of Media Power," in *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in A Networked World* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 3-39;

¹² See, Rebecca Lewis, "Alternative Influence Network: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube," *Data & Society*, September 18, 2018; Rebecca Lewis, "'This Is What the News Won't Show You': YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-Celebrity," *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 201-17.

argues that companies like VICE spearheaded and popularized viral, affective journalism and a further destabilization of the thin boundary between news and entertainment.

Instead of viewing VICE's rise to the forefront of innovative digital journalism as an inevitable part of the company's investment in news, I argue that VICE pivoted to news during a broader investment bubble around digital news, particularly video news on platforms like YouTube. This bubble—driven by the investment fervor around defining digital video markets and the future of online media—drove capital towards the speculative ventures of digital video news as the solution to a journalism industry in crisis. VICE positioned itself in the middle of this terrain, offering to at once work as a content incubator for companies like Viacom and CNN while also routinely advertising their acumen for anti-corporate digital cultures and emergent news genres. Instead of investing in more public media initiatives, the rise of social news companies continued to treat news as one product in their broader media brand, further destabilizing boundaries between news and entertainment (and advertising and journalism) and tying news' future to its potential commercial value. This chapter argues that the speculative value produced by outlets like VICE and BuzzFeed during the rise of social media platforms acted as a salve for many industries in crisis, thereby solidifying connections between social media as a distributor of “authentic” or alternative news and news' valuation based on opaque digital metrics.

At the heart of this research—particularly within journalism and communication studies—is a broader question about the role that digital platforms have played in amplifying or incentivizing the circulation of “fake,” hyperpartisan, or misinformation-based “news” content. Researching the cultural and economic power of platforms represents a growing field of study spanning a number of disciplines and subfields. Promoting a research agenda

that analyzes the complex workings of “platformization,” Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy call for more interdisciplinary work that brings together media studies, journalism studies, platform studies, and media industry studies to build “a more nuanced, less essentialist understanding of platform power and the transformation of news production.”¹³ Seeing the news ecology as a complex market with many stakeholders, they call for closer attention to the “spaces of negotiation” news organizations navigate, noting that managerial decisions within news organizations are also partially responsible for news’ reliance on platforms for distribution and the broader changes on newsgathering, agendas, textual styles, data practices, and journalistic labor in the digital era. Platformization is also a key thread within media industry studies, as similar questions are central to scholarship tracing changes within creative labor and creative industries in a platformed world.¹⁴ At the center of these subfields are vital questions about governance, regulation, and concentrated power, wherein platform companies evade responsibility for harm by strategically positioning themselves as neutral “platforms” or intermediary technology companies connecting users, creators, and advertisers.¹⁵

This scholarship has been vital for interrogating the ways that tech giants have reshaped media economies, markets, and work across a variety of sectors, gesturing towards the growing power and, as Jean-Christophe Plantin, Carl Lagoze, Paul N Edwards, and

¹³ Thomas Poell, David B. Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy, “Spaces of Negotiation: Analyzing Platform Power in the News Industry,” *Digital Journalism* 11, no. 8 (August 16, 2022): 1391-1409.

¹⁴ See, for example: Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, eds. *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment* (New York: New York University Press, 2021); Cunningham and Craig, *Social Media Entertainment*.

¹⁵ Philip Napoli and Robyn Caplan, “Why Media Companies Insist They’re Not Media Companies, Why They’re Wrong, and Why It Matters,” *First Monday*, May 2, 2017.

Christian Sandvig have termed, the “infrastructuralization” of platforms.¹⁶ Yet, disciplinary foci on specific texts or industrial configurations hampers a broader understanding of the messy and contingent boundaries that warp and change in response to an emergent media ecology/economy. For example, VICE Media is an odd object for media industry studies. Occupying a middle ground between news organization, content company, and advertising and audience insights agency, VICE sits outside the focus of many entertainment-focused studies of digital disruption. Yet, VICE has also secured investments from entertainment giants like Viacom, Disney, 21st Century Fox, and Hearst/A&E, produced series for CNN, HBO, and Showtime, and even made the unprecedented move to launch a new cable channel as a digital-first publisher. VICE has won Emmys, Peabodys and numerous other awards for their premium video content, which blends the sensibilities of online youth cultures with long-form content. Similarly, journalism studies’ focus on institutions, practices, and primarily text-based reporting focuses too narrowly on VICE’s journalistic content, separating it from the broader positioning of the company despite VICE’s controversial entrance into journalism due to its mercurial industrial positioning.

Digital media start-ups that follow similar histories and occupy similar industrial gray areas have fallen through the cracks of disciplinary silos in industry and media studies. Scholarship like Hurcombe, Burgess, and Harrington’s research on social news maps the contours of these companies as proprietors of an emergent, digitally born news genre.¹⁷ Other journalism scholars have taken a comparative lens, analyzing “hybrid” forms of news and the ways that “for-profit news startups” both challenged some and reinscribed many dominant

¹⁶ Jean-Christophe Plantin, Carl Lagoze, Paul N Edwards, and Christian Sandvig, “Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 1 (January 2018): 293-310.

¹⁷ Hurcombe et al., “What’s Noteworthy About Social News?”

modes of work and journalistic authority in the news economy.¹⁸ While these studies shed light on the relationship between a changing news industry at the hands of a platform-dominated news ecology, they often still excise outlets like VICE and BuzzFeed's journalistic work from their broader actions as large content companies with a variety of goals beyond producing journalism.¹⁹ Separating media companies like VICE, Vox, Buzzfeed, etc. from the context of media and tech convergences in the 2010's and their work as commercial content factories, independent production sites, and advertising agencies fails to see the bigger picture and organizational structure of a complex market around digital content.

I argue in this chapter that these companies' investments in digital news, from a business perspective, was responsive to a growing bubble around premium video content and optimism around the democratic potentials of social media. News was what drew in investment for companies like VICE, yet news—specifically video news—was a loss-leading product in each company's range of offerings as shown by the recent closure of the news divisions at Buzzfeed and VICE. Instead of a set of news innovators or burgeoning new guard of, as Shane Smith once said, “vertically integrated media empires,” this chapter tells the story of VICE's rise and fall in the 2010's to as a way to examine the crises of digital distribution and metrics occurring across the media and journalism industries during the platform era. While “the pivot to video” suggests that Facebook is a key player in the rags-to-riches-to-rags story of media start-ups like VICE, I dig beyond the surface to unearth the

¹⁸ Henrik Bødker, “Vice Media Inc.: Youth, Lifestyle – and News,” *Journalism* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 27–43.”; Nikki Usher, “Venture-Backed News Startups and the Field of Journalism,” *Digital Journalism* 5, no. 9 (October 21, 2017): 1116–33; Lucy Kung, *Innovators in Digital News* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2015).

¹⁹ One should also note that Peretti and Smith don't categorize their businesses as primarily news businesses, with Peretti often describing BuzzFeed as primarily a tech company. See Noah Robischon, “How BuzzFeed's Jonah Peretti Is Building A 100-Year Media Company,” *Fast Company*, February 16, 2016.

central crisis object during this time—a crisis about the future of digital video streaming and the economies and key players that surrounded its funding, metrics, and distribution.

My approach to understanding digital journalism and video markets is informed by early historiographies of emergent intermediaries during the 2010's, such as multi-channel networks (MCN's). Drawing on work from Jennifer Holt, Leslie Mann, and Rick Altman, Ramon Lobato characterized the digital video scene in the 2010's as "certainly wild and conflict-ridden, reminiscent of previous moments where new markets emerge, attracting an influx of entrepreneurial types... these are times when everything seems up for grabs, the rules have yet to be laid down and the future of the medium can take many different forms."²⁰ Echoing this approach, this chapter tells a "crisis historiography," or "the study of industries in flux, characterized by contestation and conflict among stakeholders with diverging interests, designs and imaginations of what a particular technology could become."²¹ In what follows, I use VICE Media as a way to show the interconnections between tech disruptions in journalism spaces and the entertainment industries. As multi-layered and, according to Smith, "vertically integrated," companies that sell advertising, branding, data insights, bespoke content, news programming, and film and television properties, companies like VICE represent the convergence and "wild West" that happened in the 2010's around online video and digital/social news.²² Social news emerged out of the race to tap into the internet and create content, rather than creating a solid business model to fund high quality, freely available, digitally distributed journalism.

²⁰ Ramon Lobato, "The Cultural Logic of Digital Intermediaries: YouTube Multichannel Networks," *Convergence* 22, no. 4 (August 1, 2016): 353.

²¹ Ibid.

²² VICE described its ambitions after 2014 in its marketing materials as building a "360, Multi-Platform, Vertically Integrated, Global Media Brand." See Reeves Wiedeman, "Vice Media Was Built on a Bluff. What Happens When It Gets Called?," *New York*, June 10, 2018.

I start by outlining VICE's history and the context that drove its business models throughout the 2010's, paying particular attention to its focus on digital video and the various ways the industry around digital news and video shifted based on changing advertising and distribution models. The first three sections outline this critical history, showing the ways that television conglomerates' own actions contributed to a growing social news/digital content bubble. Underneath this historiography, I point to the ways that a crisis in digital audience metrics also facilitated industry investment fervor and allowed social news companies to at first inflate their reach and then deflect from investor criticism. I then examine the fallout ending with the effects that VICE's success had on the broader digital media ecosystem, particularly for the young journalists whose labor built the award-winning content for outlets like VICE.

While I unpack the cultural and political valences of VICE's visceral approach to digital video in the next chapter, this chapter focuses on the industrial conditions that paved the way for VICE's rise within the digital media ecosystem in the 2010's. I analyze coverage of VICE and other digital start-ups in the popular and trade presses from 2012-2018. I also utilize critical testimonies posted to social media sites from former employees and insight gleaned from published reports to offer insider views to VICE's work culture and business decisions. Finally, I utilize "industry texts," such as brand guides, archived web pages, and published memoirs from key players to build a more complete picture of the broader picture of VICE and its competitors' strategic positioning within the mercurial digital media industry. This chapter adds to critical histories of digital industrial change by correlating significant events across different parts of the media industry, thereby painting a more complex picture of idea industrial/cultural power, platform politics, and the concentration of

vital resources to new media endeavors. At the center of this chapter, I argue that an unstable market around digital video streaming and content created a bubble that led to the rise (and, frankly, overvaluation) of companies like VICE. I find that the convergence between digital and entertainment industries paved the way for platforms' centralization, creating an investment bubble that solidified problematic dependencies that have had detrimental effects on an increasingly precarious journalism industry.²³

2007-2010: “Kill Your Television”: Experiments in the “Wild West” of Online Video Markets

On October 12, 2011, Rupert Murdoch tweeted: “Who’s heard of VICE Media? Wild, interesting effort to interest millennials who don’t read or watch established media. Global success.”²⁴ That same year, VICE had received just as notable criticism from long-time *New York Times* journalist, David Carr. While filming the documentary, *Page One*, Carr visited the VICE offices and defended the *Times*' journalism over new millennial-focused, experimental ventures like VICE. VICE founder Shane Smith claimed that VICE's “guerrilla” approach to journalism, such as their report titled “The Vice Guide to Liberia,” shed light on what young “new media” audiences wanted: a voyeuristic (and widely criticized), raw report in which Smith and his camera crew walked around the country,

²³ By precarious, I refer here to the ways journalistic labor is caught up in broader changes in response to the entrepreneurial creative economy. Precarity and precarious labor has been adopted in media industries scholarship, such as Michael Curtin's and Kevin Sanson's, to describe the overarching instability of media work globally, in which workers must “ready themselves for iterative change and persistent contingency as standard employment and its associated entitlements become artifacts of a bygone industrial era.” See Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, eds., *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor* (University of California Press, 2016), as well as Lindsay Palmer, *Becoming the Story: War Correspondents since 9/11* (University of Illinois Press, 2018) for how this translates to global news industries and war reporting.

²⁴ See: Rupert Murdoch (@rupertmurdoch), Twitter/X, October 13, 2012, <https://x.com/rupertmurdoch/status/257196280781099008?s=20>.

interviewing alleged cannibals, showcasing devastating infrastructural collapse, and navigating dangerous encounters.²⁵ Smith's claims were buoyed by the investments that produced the series, notably content distribution deals with Viacom, CNN, *The Guardian*, and YouTube. The video was also a viral sensation on their own website and on YouTube, where it still ranks in VICE's top ten most viewed videos of all time (26 million views) and continues to draw in comments from Western viewers on the bravery of this act of "journalism."²⁶

This odd mix of viral online popularity, "old media" investment, and paired fascination and criticism encapsulates the ambivalent place VICE Media occupied at the turn of the 2010's. By 2014, VICE had grown from making guerrilla, DIY travel documentaries primarily in war-torn places to producing a weekly newsmagazine on HBO, launching its own cable channel, winning Peabody Awards, and landing new investments that took the company's valuation to \$5.7 billion in 2017 (larger than the *New York Times*).²⁷ Rewinding back to a humbler time in VICE's history, however, the launch of VBS.tv—VICE's own "Web-based television channel"—marked the beginning of their brand of digital-first, youth-oriented journalism. While many of their future competitors, such as BuzzFeed and the Huffington Post, were building technology-driven sites geared toward aggregating links to trending blog posts and articles, VICE focused on building a library of videos and content for

²⁵ Carr said: "Before you ever went there, we've had reporters there reporting on genocide after genocide. Just because you put on a fuckin' safari helmet and looked at some poop doesn't give you the right to insult what we do." See Max Fisher, "David Carr vs. Vice: The Video That Shows Why Carr Was Such a Force in Journalism," *Vox*, February 13, 2015.

²⁶ YouTube users continue to comment on the video in a similar way that they did in 2011. Many express a sense of gratitude for living in a "first world" country, reaffirming problematic tropes of African nations as backwards, uncivilized, and barbarous. The documentary neglects to cover layered histories of corruption and colonialism, instead focusing on the shock factor of "cannibal warlords" to portray Liberia as a disaster site.

²⁷ Natalie Jarvey, "Vice Raises \$450 Million From TPG, Boosts Valuation to \$5.7 Billion," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 19, 2017.

a future of internet-distributed television. An early *Wired* article covering the launch of VBS described the site as a clip-based content library consisting of “a smattering of talk shows, music footage, and from-the-field news reports, uploaded in a series of slick-looking, one- to eight-minute installments.”²⁸ While many of the clips pair well with the boundary-pushing sensibilities of early internet content,²⁹ VICE’s “documentaries” are described as simultaneously amateur and a serious challenge to the overproduced and “objective” qualities of an increasingly commercial news ecosystem.³⁰ Spike Jonez’s commentary on VICE’s more serious video ventures sums up the creative energy around digital disruption at the time: “News doesn’t have to be told by some guy behind a desk... This is about how events are affecting us.”³¹ The tagline for the Web-TV network took an equally antagonistic stance to the “old guard” of corporate media: “Rescuing you from television’s deathlike grip.”³²

Throughout this history, I draw attention to VICE’s tactically ambivalent positionality within media spaces. As Henrik Bodker describes in his early study of the company’s journalism and industry positionality, VICE acts as a “hybrid” media form that is “partly grounded in the unfolding of news in a manner that mirrors social media news feeds, that is, a stream vacillating between visual documentation and related commentary, within a composite website that contains a whole range of other content and modes of engagement.”³³ At this time, the boundaries around news genres and journalism were being disassembled by

²⁸ Jason Tanz, “The Snarky Vice Squad Is Ready to Be Taken Seriously. Seriously.” *Wired*, October 18, 2007.

²⁹ Ibid: “Vice’s loud, fast, and dirty sensibility seems perfect for Internet video, and VBS offers plenty of that kind of content—lascivious interviews with naked models, profiles of skateboarding stars, and music videos by indie rockers.”

³⁰ Ibid: “Most of the VBS staff has no experience in journalism or television production, which may explain the absence of network news staples: no makeup, no artificial lighting, no handheld microphones, and—most crucially—no bones about being totally biased.”

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Bodker, 40.

challenges from blogs and unilateral journalists reporting on the fallacies and blind spots of a corporate media system.³⁴ This collapse in institutional authority (and industry structure) allowed VICE to move in ways similar to technology companies, in which their ambivalent strategic positioning allowed the company to pivot and change to fit new industry constellations and shifting power dynamics. In what follows, I demonstrate the ways that news functioned as a product for VICE—a development that was not about their political commitments, but rather a response to a speculative bubble around new journalism models, amateur reporting and documentary practice, and entrepreneurial solutions to entrenched problems.³⁵

This positionality in the interstices of television and web TV is effaced from presentist descriptions of VICE as a news organization, which elides critical historiographical connections to crises in distribution, authority, and authenticity that are more prominent in entertainment-based media industries work on creator economies. For example, critical journalism scholarship has examined the ways that media companies like VICE Media, BuzzFeed, Vox, Mic, and others differ from legacy news organizations as a lens for understanding emergent news genres that they see as responding to an increasingly complex news ecology. Edward Hurcombe's *Social News: How Born-Digital Outlets Transformed Journalism* investigates the rise of “social news,” or news created specifically for social media distribution and geared toward a young, digital savvy audience, rose to prominence in

³⁴ Many of these changes happened at the critical juncture point between the conglomeration (and defunding) of newsrooms and widespread criticism of mainstream news' coverage of social movements and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

³⁵ At times, I put “journalism” in quotes or use descriptive terms of VICE's journalistic ambivalence to denote specific moments in the company's history when VICE's videos' relationship to news standards were still tentative and ambiguous.

the 2010's.³⁶ He argues that the genre of “social news” spoke to a broader desire to combine technological innovations and journalism to reimagine news as a category that could eschew traditional Western journalistic norms of objectivity and a politics-focused news agenda in favor of the kinds of news that users want to share via social media.³⁷

From this perspective, the rise of social media in this complex tangle of disruption by internet technologies and businesses held radical promises for challenging the monolithic power of a concentrated media industry—a theme that cuts across debates about shifting media power in regard to entertainment industries and a cadre of fans, artists, and indie creatives in media industries literature. David Craig and Stuart Cunningham’s *Social Media Entertainment: the New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* finds that social media platforms often centered themselves as spaces primed for aspiring creators to find their audience and make a living online (to differing results).³⁸ This era of disruption paved the way for incredible challenges to dominant media institutions and for new perspectives to enter the arena of cultural production, but it also built on older models of markets, business models, and modes of exploitation to define a largely unregulated internet. Craig and Cunningham characterize social media entertainment’s emergence as a new proto industry with both some similarity to media histories of television and Hollywood but with distinct differences due to their mix of “SoCal” (TV, Hollywood) and “NoCal” (tech, start-up) logics. Despite the rampant possibilities for a digitally connected future, however, this section

³⁶ Edward Hurcombe, *Social News: How Born-Digital Outlets Transformed Journalism* (Springer Nature, 2022).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Cunningham and Craig argue that YouTube played a central role in the emergence of the “social media entertainment” industry. They find YouTube represents a middle ground between portals for professionally generated content (Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, iTunes) and user-generated content (Facebook, Twitter, Twitch, Instagram, Snapchat). Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* (New York: NYU Press, 2019): 23.

challenges narratives that take for granted social media platforms' central role in ushering in these changes in entertainment and news ecosystems alike, which was not entirely inevitable from the vantage point of the mid-2000's.

As one of the "first-movers" in monetizing digital video, Cunningham and Craig center YouTube as a key player in this industry's development.³⁹ Two years after YouTube co-founder Jawed Karim posted the first video on the platform and a clip of SNL's "Lazy Sunday" revealed the connective/collective power of the viral internet, the advent of digital distribution for video content was beginning to threaten previous business and labor models within the entrenched media giants of the time. While this would change in later years, this business model was built on utilizing the internet (and spaces like YouTube) as a laboratory for content development. YouTube's addition of visible metrics, like view counts and "top viewed" lists, introduced a complementary model to television by ranking content creation and normalizing data-driven development practices.⁴⁰ As Patrick Vonderau asserts in his history of "the video bubble" of early YouTube, the company's participatory veneer was primarily a marketing scheme to build an audience on user-generated content, to which the company would later add syndicated television shows and film in order to attract advertisers and charge users to view professional content.⁴¹

From today's perspective, YouTube's creator economy seems like a natural extension of its business model and an inevitable challenge to television's dominance. Yet, video scholars like Ramon Lobato, Patrick Vondereau, and Stuart Cunningham, David Craig, and Jon Silver noted in their coverage of multi-channel networks (MCN's) in 2016 that there was

³⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁰ Vonderau, "Writers Becoming Users."

⁴¹ Patrick Vonderau, "The Video Bubble: Multichannel Networks and the Transformation of YouTube," *Convergence* 22, no. 4 (August 1, 2016): 361–75.

a definitive shift in YouTube's focus when it chose to reorganize the platform around semi-professional channels. This platform redesign represented a crucial moment in which YouTube positioned itself in direct competition with both technology giants and media conglomerates in the race to shape digital video streaming models and markets.⁴² Lobato describes YouTube's shift toward professionalizing amateur content as a change in YouTube's "cultural logic" that violated the DIY communities that YouTube once celebrated. Vonderau is much more skeptical. Using internal communications from YouTube's early business planning, he finds that introducing artificial scarcity via channels and then multi-channel networks was part of YouTube's original business plan. Despite drawing on the DIY rhetoric of the nascent creative economy, YouTube's founders aimed to scale and monetize "every conceivable niche of online video," thereby creating a marketplace in which YouTube could aggregate and sell targeted audiences to advertisers. Professionalizing content and channeling users toward this premium content was a centerpiece of this strategy as YouTube competed with outlets like Hulu for advertising revenue, which brought in more revenue because of its focus on distributing professional content despite having a smaller audience reach.⁴³

In other words, despite YouTube branding itself as a platform for amateur content, Vonderau predicted the rise of a speculative "video bubble" based on YouTube's desire to aggregate and direct viewers' pathways to aid and attract advertisers. Vonderau notes that the speculative project of "infinite scalability" drives all new media ventures toward increasing

⁴² Stuart Cunningham, David Craig, and Jon Silver, "YouTube, Multichannel Networks and the Accelerated Evolution of the New Screen Ecology," *Convergence* 22, no. 4 (August 1, 2016): 376–91; Ramon Lobato, "The Cultural Logic of Digital Intermediaries: YouTube Multichannel Networks," *Convergence* 22, no. 4 (August 1, 2016): 348–60; Vonderau, "The Video Bubble."

⁴³ Vonderau, "The Video Bubble."

levels of aggregation, which “has consequently moved the value of video away from the very video itself.”⁴⁴ While much of the work of digital disruption on this end focuses on entertainment-based video production, this section maps the haphazard beginnings of “web TV” before zooming in on the ways that digital video disruptions spilled outwards across media sectors in the next section. The “video bubble” created by YouTube’s rise resulted in a competition between social media platforms, which spilled outward into the space of news. VICE—and other digital publishers—hopped on this video news bubble in order to attract more advertising revenue and investments.

Despite YouTube’s ascendancy as a central driver of video markets, critical historiographies of “web TV” show YouTube did not start competing with television for advertising revenue until roughly 2011, when it rolled out its channels initiative.⁴⁵ Prior to YouTube’s pivot to monetizing its own creators, many proto-YouTubers’ video networks preceded YouTube’s centralization of video traffic and markets, signaling a need to challenge histories that present industry change as part of a linear history of platformization. For example, Aymar Jean Christian has described the variety of web TV experiments happening before YouTube’s launch. Initially, many of these series were short-lived, clunky to view due to slow loading speeds, and lacked a large, monetizable audience during the internet’s page-driven era. By 2005, however, growing broadband capacity—specifically the introduction of Flash in 2005—created a new surge in viewership for streaming internet video. According to Christian, YouTube succeeded because it presented a clear business model for monetizing digital video audiences, leading to renewed interest in investing in

⁴⁴ Ibid, 372.

⁴⁵ “YouTube goes TV,” *Brand-e.biz*, November 1, 2011; Paul Bond and Georg Szalai, “YouTube Announces TV Initiative With 100 Niche Channels,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 28, 2011.

digital video ventures from a wide swath of industry stakeholders looking to create (and cash in on) a “democratized” (and cheap) new set of digital creatives.⁴⁶ This wave of internet video creators adopted a distinctly anti-television ethos, using the web to experiment with “small-size quirky humor for alternative video web networks.”⁴⁷ This often involved using boundary-pushing comedy to refute the “censorship” or sanitization of discourse in what they saw as an otherwise politically correct media landscape. While developing videos for growing .tv domains like Revision3 or Digg, the hope was always to be picked up elsewhere, such as syndication to television, film, or larger websites.⁴⁸ In this era of what Amanda Lotz called “post-network TV,” many of these sites were launched with an anti-television, or “revolutionary” ethos, thereby challenging the “old guard” of homogenized corporate media with edgy, forward-thinking digital content despite carrying many stylistic approaches and business models over from television and film.⁴⁹

Despite a decade of attempts to develop and monetize internet traffic, however, it was still yet unclear how popular (that is, commodifiable) digital video would be and what its relationship to television and media conglomerates would look like. Similarly, industry coverage of VICE’s foray into web TV production shows that YouTube’s hold on digital video streaming was not yet apparent in the mid-2000s. A 2007 *Wired* article describing the VBS launch skates over the rise of YouTube, stating that VICE’s Viacom-funded videos

⁴⁶ Aymar Jean Christian, “The Web as Television Reimagined? Online Networks and the Pursuit of Legacy Media,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 36, no. 4 (October 1, 2012): 351: “The arrival of YouTube showed venture capitalists that web video could function more seamlessly than in the past, and companies would eventually try to harness the labor of users—user-generated content—believing production had truly been “democratized.” YouTube pledged to give users “their own personal video network,” and venture capitalists, former television and film executives, media conglomerates, and independent writers and producers all participated in the next wave of the new television: streaming video.”

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁴⁸ Tanz, “The Snarky Vice Squad.”

⁴⁹ Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized, 2nd Edition* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

streaming channel is “elbowing its way into the crowded young industry of Internet television, joining major broadcast and cable networks, Hollywood production companies, and homegrown sites like Heavy.com and Revision3.”⁵⁰ During this time, YouTube was described alongside multiple experiments in online video streaming, such as male-focused sites like Heavy.com, a growing online library of Viacom content, and even internet front pages like AOL and Yahoo!, who were upping their investments in a video-driven web. The same article described the market for web video as already “stiff... And getting stiffer.”⁵¹ As late as 2007, digital streaming video continued to face uphill battles in terms of “attention, legitimacy, and profit,” with *Wired* claiming that “[web video] has yet to prove itself as a true competitor to television by actually making much money.”⁵² Venture capitalists and media conglomerates alike were trying to find the “next” web talent, investing in internet-grown sites like Heavy.com and Funny or Die or creating their own internet video sites, like HBO/AOL’s jointly owned comedy site This Just In, TBS’ funding of comedian-owned SuperDeluxe, and CNN’s first video streaming site, CNN Pipeline.⁵³ Many of these initial forays into internet video failed or were folded into their parent companies, yet a variety of media and internet companies—alongside a burgeoning venture capital market—continued to pour money into these web-native video productions, including YouTube when it launched its channels initiative.

Many of what would become YouTube’s most popular channels started out hosting their own video using .tv domains, selling ad space on their webpages, and helping advertising brands reach its “golden audience” member—increasingly online 18–34-year-old

⁵⁰ Tanz, “The Snarky Vice Squad.”

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

men. As Christian notes, this era of web TV often looked to push the boundaries of a so-called “sanitized” mainstream media environment, which often dabbled in racial humor and nudity.⁵⁴ Regardless, this era of “web TV” aimed to create an alternative world of content geared toward millennial (male) sensibilities. Interviews with company figureheads for sites like Revision3, The Young Turks, and VICE featured similar language, touting their new internet television networks as a “changing of the guard” from old media to new media and encouraging viewers to “kill your television” by embracing an unfiltered, more authentic world online.⁵⁵ These channels built on the predecessors mapped by Christian, focusing on short tech reviews, tutorials, comedy sketches, and irreverent news shows. Notably, they often involved challenging censorship on television and objectivity in the news, with left-leaning personalities like Cenk Uygur and right-leaning pundits like Andrew Breitbart starting their own web-based news shows for alternative news-seeking audiences.⁵⁶

For VICE, this investment fervor translated into the aforementioned \$2 million deal with Viacom to create VBS.tv as an incubator or laboratory for “new media”-driven MTV programming. Through this deal, VICE produced and web-hosted a video series that MTV repackaged for its US and international cable channels, eventually spinning off the series into a weekly show starring Shane Smith, Suroosh Alvi, Thomas Morton, and Ryan Duffy. They also gained ex-Viacom executive, Tom Freston, as a close advisor and Spike Jonze as the series’ creative director, the latter of whom was pivotal to crafting VICE’s signature “immersionist” videographic style.⁵⁷ Freston’s positioning within the broader television and

⁵⁴ Christian, “The Web as Television Reimagined?”

⁵⁵ Vonderau, “The Video Bubble,”; Tanz, “The Snarky Vice Squad.”

⁵⁶ Rob Owen, “The Next Wave: Ex-WTAE Anchor Scott Baker Changes Channel to Run Web News Site,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 16, 2007.

⁵⁷ The timeline is unclear, but Freston took a focused interest in VICE around 2006, roughly the same time he was notoriously fired from Viacom for allegedly not moving quickly enough to buy MySpace. When MySpace was acquired by 20th Century Fox, Sumner Redstone blamed Freston. One could read into the timing that VICE

media industries, combined with Jonez' cultural cache and hands-on approach to developing VICE's approach to video and storytelling, is often cited as the guiding hand behind its transition to a digital media company. Despite these deep ties to established media players, VICE's edgy digital content was viewed as Viacom's answer to a floundering digital distribution strategy. A *New York Times* article covering the deal categorized the arrangement as a way for Viacom to utilize "smaller firms like Vice to lead them through the digital wilderness."⁵⁸ Described as "60 Minutes-meets-Jackass," VICE proposed to create experimental content based on their magazine articles, with Viacom providing funding in exchange for using VICE as a "low-cost laboratory" or incubator for reaching and monetizing an increasingly digital audience.⁵⁹

During this time, VICE produced two hit series that would eventually become the model for their rise to news and entertainment juggernaut. The first was a series produced by creative director Spike Jonez called *The Vice Guide to Travel* (2006), which was also commissioned for distribution via CNN. The second was a longer documentary, *Heavy Metal in Baghdad* (2006), which debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival after first airing in segments on VICE's website. Shot shortly after VICE published a story on the band for the magazine, the video followed Shane Smith and Suroosh Alvi as they spent time with Iraqi heavy metal band, Acrassicauda, documenting how the group navigated life during the US

was perhaps Freston's revenge; VICE later bought back Viacom's stake in the company around the same time that Freston invested personally in VICE. See, Daniel Miller, "Vice Media Secures Investment from Tom Freston, Others," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 4, 2011; "Vice Announces Major Investment Partnerships with MTV Founder Tom Freston, WPP and The Raine Group," *Business Wire*, April 5, 2011.

⁵⁸ Robert Levine, "MTV Gets Low-Cost Lab with a Rebel Video Site," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2007.

⁵⁹ While it's unclear from industry reporting how this arrangement came about, the *New York Times* points out that VICE already had a working relationship with Viacom, who published their Vice Guidebooks and also paid VICE to consult on an ad campaign for the game Rock Band. See, Levine, "MTV Gets Low-Cost Lab" and Robert Levine, "A Guerrilla Video Site Meets MTV," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2007.

military occupation and as refugees during their moves to Syria and eventually the United States. This web-spun video was the pinnacle of internet DIY production—Canadian punk rockers go to meet and hang out with Iraqi headbangers and end up getting a heartfelt story about their trials and resilience as everyday citizens navigating life under occupation, war, and eventually refugee statelessness.

Reviews of VICE’s “guerrilla videos” raised questions about how to define VICE’s “immersionist” videos. A *New York Times* review of “The VICE Guide to Everything” panned VICE’s approach to the newsmagazine genre, finding that “The mix of naïveté and bravado can get tiresome... Mr. Smith isn’t able to tell even a sliver of the story effectively.”⁶⁰ Yet, Canada’s *Globe and Mail* found that, despite a fair amount of posturing by the on-screen VICE hosts, “what makes it all worthwhile is the natural curiosity of Smith and his cohorts. They ask questions that you or I might feel like asking... And, to the vast youth audience watching MTV, the series must surely unveil a world more complex, more nuanced than they see in any other medium that attempts to explain the world.”⁶¹ Examining coverage of these early videos, it appears that the company repackaged many of its documentaries for different distribution portals, with some videos appearing both on VICE’s weekly MTV show, “The VICE Guide to Everything,” and on CNN’s website as “VICE on CNN.” VICE’s Liberia documentary was one of the videos posted to CNN’s web page, sparking the notorious spat with David Carr, who questioned VICE’s journalistic ethics because of its sensationalistic, amateur approach to news. After fielding Carr’s critique, Smith backpedaled from his stance that VICE was at the forefront of a revolution in digital

⁶⁰ Alessandra Stanley, “A Spoonful of Exotica Makes the Geography Go Down,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2010.

⁶¹ John Doyle, “The Vice Guide to Everything: It May Look like Gonzo Journalism, but It Matters,” *The Globe and Mail*, December 14, 2010.

news, stating that the VICE team were not journalists, but rather interested documentarians. This contradictory stance of claiming to produce news when it helped forward their brand demonstrates the slipperiness of the company's relationship to fact-checking and journalistic ethics. As I detail in the next section, VICE would only double down on formalizing its news division and journalistic practices once digital news became a lucrative product for building their brand's value for investors.

VICE's status as an "incubator" or "low-cost" laboratory for digital content production allowed the company critical space to experiment with boundary-pushing internet content while being shielded from the externalities of being entirely independently funded (and, by being independent, shielding Viacom from flak for their amateur ethos). While VICE's initial forays into news-adjacent documentaries were the blueprint for what would become the brand's flagship content, the company's success hinged more on the success of a different venture. Using its strategic location in hip, creative Williamsburg (and Viacom-funded production infrastructure), VICE struck a deal with Intel in 2009 to produce a web video series and slate of global events that celebrated artists who experimented with new digital technologies. The Creators Project was a multi-year initiative VICE produced that brought a slate of cutting-edge artists to cities across the world, during which VICE produced and hosted interviews and promotional materials on a dedicated website for artistic online audiences to follow.⁶² All of this was funded by Intel, which paid VICE "tens of millions of dollars" to throw lavish branded parties that would hopefully translate into more brand recognition for Intel within creative circles.⁶³ According to a *Forbes* article detailing how the success of the Creators Project impacted VICE and the future of sponsored branded content:

⁶² Creators project cites.

⁶³ The numbers are vague, but some sources put the value at up to \$25 million. Creators Project cites.

The Creators Project serves as a microcosm of the emerging digital-content paradigm that Vice [sic] is helping to shape... [T]raditional ads are simply no longer an effective means of reaching young consumers, who are getting ever more of their media calories from online video, mobile apps and even videogames, says [chief marketing officer Deborah Conrad]... ‘It was obvious that for us to introduce our brand to that group of people, we had to do it in a way that was authentic to the way they consume content.’⁶⁴

The Creators Project won three Webby awards and was widely reported on; many cite its success as a pivotal moment in an unsettled digital media economy, showing the potential market for a mix of creativity, branded content, and digital networks focused on selling “authentic” content. These initial successes in the “wild West” of the early digital video economy were formative for VICE’s subsequent rise as a powerhouse in digital content creation. While VICE was smaller than other web-based video sites like College Humor, it was unique in that it established an identifiable brand related to the revolutionary potential of the internet and forged a new model for advertisers looking to reach digital users. As a hybrid news, entertainment, and advertising company with a foot in both the worlds of media conglomerates like Viacom and tech companies like YouTube, VICE straddled many industry lines and fields in these early days. Their desires to build out a slate of successful video verticals and provide creative services for brands across their properties mimicked the strategies of MCN’s. Their “old media” connections helped broker distribution deals in an undeveloped and unregulated digital video economy, allowing their brand to both cash in on a digital, “anti-television” image and using “old media” to expand their audience reach. To a

⁶⁴ Jeff Bercovici, “Tom Freston’s Revenge,” *Forbes*, January 3, 2012.

variety of key players in the age of digital disruption, VICE offered a clear answer to the question of online video audiences: funding VICE as a digital content incubator created an insulated space to experiment with boundary-pushing web content while safeguarding MTV and CNN from advertiser concerns about brand image. The company did all of this before putting their content on social media platforms like YouTube, which challenges dominant narratives that “social news” companies were born dependent on social media traffic. Further, VICE’s early history shows that these dependencies were not inevitable, but rather were contingent upon (while also contributing to) other factors that led to an investment bubble around viral digital news.

2011-2015: The Social News Bubble + Viral Content’s “Holy Shit” Moment

The Creators Project epitomized a cultural and industrial moment during which emergent digital distribution methods, internet-based technologies, and creative people on the fringes of the consolidated media industries came together to create something new. While funded by a huge corporation, the Creators Project purportedly celebrated independent creativity powered by a digital revolution that democratized access to creative production and distribution. It also introduced a new funding model for digital content and solidified the possibilities for an emergent market for semi- and non-professional video content. Partially based on this creative collision, Intel announced that it would continue to focus its research and development on building more consumer-facing graphics capabilities, solidifying that the next phase of the Internet would push beyond text and into high-resolution images, videos, etc. at the hands of regular consumers. VICE also translated this project’s success into further brand deals, creating sponsored channels with Dell on music (Noisey) and technology

(Motherboard). The Creators Project also followed the same speculative, aggregational logic proposed by Vonderau that created the speculative “video bubble”: on the one hand, VICE acted as a curator of up-and-coming digital creators; on the other, they were aggregating audiences interested in digital art and creativity into one physical (events/parties) and digital (The Creators Project website) space and selling their attention to Intel.

Coincidentally, 2011 marked the year that YouTube launched its channels initiative, shifting its infrastructure from a “pull” model based on aggregating video content to one more reminiscent of television’s “push” model, in which it prioritized connecting viewers to high-performing videos. VICE became one of YouTube’s first premium channels, an initiative that saw YouTube invest \$100-150 million in building out a channel-based layout that encouraged consumption via identifiable, professional channels rather than browsing curated user-generated video content. By introducing channels and tweaking its interface to privilege longer watch sessions, YouTube tactically moved to centralize its place in the world of online video in 2011. The company monetized their audiences by introducing more “premium” content on the platform and financially incentivizing an array of content creators and other web video sites to publish unique content on the site. While scholars like Lobato described this as a pivotal moment when YouTube “sold out” their mission to provide a democratic space for everyday web users, Vonderau’s research demonstrates how promoting user-generated content was merely a tactical way for YouTube to build its platform, aggregate content, and grow its audiences before introducing less risky “premium” content in order to attract advertisers.⁶⁵ As I unpack in the final two sections, chasing a speculative video news bubble championed speculative (and ultimately unprofitable) business models to

⁶⁵ Lobato, “The Cultural Logic of Intermediaries”; Vonderau, “The Video Bubble.”

present themselves as the solution to a burgeoning journalism crisis. Today, the impacts of this are felt in the widespread dependencies between online news and social media platforms that have destabilized the boundaries around journalistic work and opened the field to embracing increasingly entrepreneurial (and often toxic) work cultures and subordinated journalism efforts write large to the interests of social media platforms and their affective networks of influence.

Securing two of YouTube's original 100 channels, VICE's channels were ranked at 11 and 12 in *Deadline's* debut power rankings of an emergent digital creator culture, with each drawing in roughly 1.5 million weekly views.⁶⁶ At this stage, VICE's ranking was above many of the multi-channel networks that garnered a lot of media and scholarly attention during the rise of the creator economy, such as Machinima, Maker Studios, and AwesomenessTV. Developing YouTube-born media brands and content/creator management companies was central to the company's plan to compete with television and film. *Deadline's* power rankings noted that it "didn't take long for YouTube's original content channels to come of age," reporting that as soon as May 2012, Google "presented YouTube's channels to advertisers as an alternative to conventional television in the 2012-13 upfront market."⁶⁷

While these archived original rankings provide a fascinating glimpse into the proto-YouTube creator economy, what is most interesting is the heated debate occurring in the article's comments section. The debate centers on the validity of the article's claim that spaces like YouTube were starting to challenge the power of the media and entertainment

⁶⁶ "New Feature: Deadline's Weekly YouTube Channel Rankings," *Deadline*, May 29, 2012. Original webpage with comments and rankings archived on the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20141009194531/https://deadline.com/2012/05/new-feature-deadlines-weekly-youtube-channel-rankings-274889/>

⁶⁷ Ibid.

industries, particularly regarding audience metrics. Some claimed that only measuring YouTube's invited channels ignored the broader ecosystem of YouTube creators and acted as a marketing ploy to boost these channels to advertisers. Other commenters refuted the claim that "view counts" were an accurate measure of television's death at the hands of digital video streaming, outlining detailed arguments about the differences between channel or episode *views* and the Nielsen standard of measuring *viewers*. Others simply saw view counts in the millions and declared "the broadcast and pilot model is broken and I just saw the final nail in its coffin."⁶⁸ This paired fascination with the scale of digital audiences represented by YouTube view counts and questions about the meaningfulness of this data loomed over this time when digital video efforts turned their attention to convincing advertisers to invest their spending in digital video. Nevertheless, YouTube's 2011 channel launch and simultaneous interface redesign announced the company's intention to compete for dominance in digital video content markets, signaling YouTube's move away from amassing a library of user-generated clips (which built the company's popularity) and a move toward prioritizing "premium" content.

Another disruptive series of events outside of these broader industrial shifts shares equal importance in creating this digital video news bubble because of the ways it challenged many established news companies already struggling to adapt to a digital information ecology. While YouTube aimed to disrupt the media industries by introducing a slate of original programming via the channels initiative, the early 2010s was also a time when social media platforms were disrupting the flow of news agendas and publishing, placing user-generated networks hosted by Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube at the center of global news

⁶⁸ Ibid.

stories. Culturally, 2011 was a watershed moment for social media networks' role in challenging an entrenched corporate media environment. As described by social movement scholars like Zeynep Tufekci in *Twitter and Tear Gas*, platforms like Facebook and Twitter were used by activists to organize global protests against authoritarian regimes and the globalization of capitalist reach.⁶⁹ While Twitter and Facebook played a large role in global social movements as early as the Iranian uprisings in 2009 and carrying into the 2010-2011 uprisings across the Middle East, in the United States, the 2011 and 2014 Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter protests also leaned on digital tools and social media to combat problematic coverage—a tactic that persists in activist organizing today.⁷⁰ In the United States, the message of the Occupy Wall Street movement was “broadcast” by everyday citizen witnesses, whose on-the-ground livestreaming efforts further entrenched growing distrust of corporate news giants like CNN. By 2012, a Gallup report showed that as many as 60% of Americans expressed significant distrust in “mainstream media,” pushing many online to find alternative perspectives and reporting that aimed to be more authentic than the highly commercial and “overproduced” nature of channels like CNN.⁷¹ The democratic potential of the internet—and, during this time, social media sites—incited a desire to seek out “the truth” online, with social media platforms at the center.

VICE's success hinged on a digital-first rebranding that placed VICE's content production efforts into making a big bet on digital video that spoke to this broader desire to

⁶⁹ Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁷⁰ It should be noted that while left-leaning hopefuls emphasized the progressive possibilities of social media platforms in the early 2010's, these platforms were just as instrumental in organizing conservative and extremist movements, such as ISIS's social media-focused “digital warfare” (explored in the next chapter) and the rise of white supremacist and misogynist groups. For more on this, see Jen Schradie, *The Revolution That Wasn't: How Digital Activism Favors Conservatives* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019).

⁷¹ Anderson and Caumont, “How Social Media Is Reshaping News.”

see the global news differently than the ways television news positioned viewers. These broader disruptions in the “mainstream” media and news ecosystems made VICE well positioned to center themselves within this space. VICE’s early experiments in stylized documentaries in far-flung locations created some waves, but it wasn’t immediately clear that VICE would continue to center their news-adjacent content considering the success of its three branded channels. Yet, Smith often cites VICE’s move to YouTube as the moment they discovered that boundary-pushing digital news videos would be their flagship product. In various interviews, many VICE senior executives stated that their news and documentary videos were what received the most views out of their broader YouTube library. In a 2015 retrospective on VICE’s entrance into the world of “serious journalism” published in *The Guardian*, VICE UK’s head of video content Al Brown stated:

The content that outstripped everything else by a huge margin was our most serious hard-hitting documentaries like Vice [sic] goes to Liberia. Everyone told us to make bitesized funny clips but we were putting 20-50-minute serious documentaries and they were by far the most popular thing we put up. There was a very well-connected global young hungry audience which wanted to experience big complex global stories in a way that was accessible and no one else was doing it.⁷²

While it’s necessary to take inside players’ insights with a grain of salt, the wave of digital news initiatives that sprung up after 2011 gestures toward a broader cultural desire for an internet-driven form of journalism that challenged many of the stable foundations and business models established in both print and television news. The convergence between

⁷² Jane Martinson, “The Virtues of Vice: How Punk Magazine Was Transformed into Media Giant,” *The Guardian*, January 1, 2015.

technological disruption and global political upheaval opened a vacuum for new, innovative content that reached millennial audiences in a more “authentic” way. As I unpacked in the previous chapter, authenticity discourse often creates a neoliberal articulation of cultural difference through its intersection with the logics of brand culture, as developed by Sarah Banet-Weiser.⁷³ While Banet-Weiser’s critical interventions into the neoliberal operations of creative culture have not found their way into discussions of nascent journalism efforts that also took shape at this time, I see VICE’s brand of “authentic” news as part of its broader ambivalent politics of branded difference.

The rise of citizen journalism challenged Western journalism giants’ hold on news narratives, leading to experiments in these “authentic” (read: non-corporate) grassroots journalism and citizen reporting that challenged dominant news brands’ authority. VICE’s head of news hit on this—and VICE’s role in providing this service—shortly after the launch of VICE News, stating that “[b]roadcasters say people trust us but that’s not true. Trust is not the battleground, authenticity is the battleground.”⁷⁴ Social media platforms also placed themselves within this wave of techno-utopian democratic fervor due to their already global reach and usability.⁷⁵ Seeing the revolutionary sheen of social media platforms following their role in many social movements, other digital content companies also moved to fill this gap in millennial-driven news. BuzzFeed launched BuzzFeed News in 2011 in advance of Obama’s second presidential campaign, and Mic gained notoriety for on-the-ground coverage of the 2011 Tunisian uprisings, with countless other digital media brands like Vox,

⁷³ Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

⁷⁴ Martinson, “The Virtues of Vice.”

⁷⁵ It’s important to note that social media platforms are often blamed for the death of Indymedia, the original grassroots journalism network, solidifying dependence on commercial platforms for wide distribution.

Complex, Fusion, and others launching news divisions between 2011-2014.⁷⁶ For these companies, “authentic,” disruptive journalism was built on challenging the norms of traditional journalism, such as foregoing political neutrality, detached objectivity, and explanatory modes of narrating stories. VICE in particular blurred the lines between documentary and news genres by eschewing both an engagement with the deep histories of documentary praxis and newsroom textual conventions, hierarchical structures, and authentication/verification regimens.⁷⁷ VICE tactically operated in the converged boundaries in media forms and formats that were characteristic of this time, at times claiming to be DIY documentarians, and at others championing their work as the future of more “authentic” news.

VICE tapped into this growing market for “authenticity,” specifically in their video pursuits, building their brand around millennial-focused news content aimed at a primarily online audience. Yet, while VICE’s video revolution began online, it used its claims to reach millennial audiences to sell them back to advertisers via distribution deals with the “old guard” they purported to disrupt. At their first Upfront event in November 2011, “Vice pitched itself as a news organization savvy enough to use the tricks of [porn] to make the business of serious international news reporting more lucrative.”⁷⁸ They also announced a new slate of branded travel and other unscripted documentary series underwritten by brand giants like GE, Toshiba, and Mini, which would be distributed on VICE’s website, YouTube channel, and across a growing number of distribution partners. In a bid to “get all of that

⁷⁶ Cite.

⁷⁷ Of course these lines have always been blurred in news history in actuality—newsreels, network news specials, Cold War news documentaries, and even shows like 20/20, Dateline, etc. blur the boundaries between documentary as artistic praxis and documentary as journalistic format, often by way of investigative reporting.

⁷⁸ Kat Stoeffel, “Vice’s Grown-Up Upfront,” *Observer*, September 20, 2011.

content in front of as many viewers as possible—and as many advertisers as possible,” VICE announced partnerships with a number of global and US-based media companies, including the Huffington Post, The Guardian, Renren in China, Terra in Brazil and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.⁷⁹

The primary focus of VICE’s 2011 Upfront event, however, was announcing its debut series on television: a 30-minute weekly newsmagazine on HBO. CNN’s Fareed Zakaria and HBO’s Bill Maher co-produced the series, which seemingly signaled VICE’s credibility in the space of news and political commentary.⁸⁰ While shooting and developing the HBO program, VICE continued to build its following on YouTube and parlayed its distribution deals and rising star as a leading millennial news and digital culture company into generous investments from Tom Freston, WPP, and Raine Group. They also continued to build their brand portfolio via their in-house creative agency, Virtue, which offered campaign creation services and advertising spots, eventually scaling up to providing audience insights utilizing internal data. Yet, it was specifically the launch of VICE on HBO in 2013 that marked the watershed moment for VICE’s rise as a news organization. Between 2011 and the series’ launch in 2012, the company invested significant resources into building up its slate of young, “authentic” journalists. This included finding young reporters willing to create live, on-the-ground reports in a raw, amateur fashion. Notably, VICE hired Tim Pool to cover unfolding protests and civil unrest across the world. Pool, who had no training in journalism or reporting, became synonymous with the anti-corporate, grassroots ethos of Indymedia

⁷⁹ Tanzina Vega, “Vice Media to Expand Offerings of Video Entertainment on Its Site,” September 14, 2011.

⁸⁰ Stoeffel, “Vice’s Grown-Up Upfront.” None of the coverage focused on the fact that Time Warner also owned CNN at the time, which VICE already had a content deal with to produce a web video series. Bringing on Maher and Zakaria as executive producers makes industrial sense to help meld VICE’s work with HBO’s prestige TV brand and CNN’s dominance/credibility in cable news.

through his efforts livestreaming the Occupy Wall Street movement in late 2011. Pool cites the virality of streaming internet videos of protests and uprisings as his reason for joining the world of citizen-witnessing; moved by a viral video of protests in Zuccotti Park, he bought a bus ticket to New York and played an instrumental role in introducing online audiences to digital witnessing.⁸¹

The immediacy and “authenticity” provided by the proliferation of smartphone and digital technologies that allowed for instantaneous updates from the ground level allowed many journalists and everyday citizens to tell a variety of stories, sometimes with the aim of challenging dominant news narratives. Outlets like VICE attracted personalities interested in reporting from new angles, which hitched VICE’s edgy brand name to a field of amateur journalists looking to, as VICE’s HBO claimed, explore “the absurdity of the modern condition.” VICE cashed in on this burgeoning interest in raw, “authentic,” amateur reporting, hiring Pool and others to livestream the 2013 protests in Turkey (Pool), the 2014 Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson (Alice Speri), and the 2014 Ukrainian uprising (Simon Ostrovsky).⁸² These reports placed young reporters in the heart of the action, speaking frankly and honestly about their observations from the ground and with minimal crew, sometimes foregoing a crew in favor of direct livestreaming via Google Glass. This lean approach to news production tapped into a desire to see more “authentic” news coverage

⁸¹ Andrew Marantz, “The Live-Streamers Who Are Challenging Traditional Journalism,” *The New Yorker*, December 4, 2017; Sean Captain, “Tim Pool And Henry Ferry: The Men Behind Occupy Wall Street’s Live Stream,” *Fast Company*, November 21, 2011. Pool now has a significant YouTube following and has been categorized as part of a growing network of right-leaning/libertarian “independent” YouTube journalists.

⁸² Stuart Dredge, “How Vice’s Tim Pool Used Google Glass to Cover Istanbul Protests,” *The Guardian*, July 30, 2013. After VICE’s bankruptcy, Ostrovsky later blamed Smith for mishandling the company, stating that he wasn’t surprised that VICE folded. He detailed his experience with Smith in the early 2010’s, who, from his perspective, was much more interested in playing the part of media mogul than committing to advancing a new guard of journalism. See: Simon Ostrovsky (@SimonOstrovsky), “I first met Shane in 2011 in a Japanese restaurant on Russia’s Chinese border. He was a week late to a shoot I had meticulously produced on N. Korean slave labor. He spend the whole meal talking about gold watches he owned. Who’d of thunk Vice would fail?”, Twitter/X, May 1, 2023, <https://twitter.com/SimonOstrovsky/status/1653199387256840194>.

that tested the boundaries of journalistic ethics by adopting an unfiltered and often amateur/citizen/DIY ethos to frame the VICE visual style. The debut of VICE on HBO similarly focused on violence, uprisings, and warzones, combining an amateur ethos of non-professional on-screen talent with an up-close look at large stories, often told through the perspectives of people on the ground at sites of conflict.

In 2013, VICE's visibility skyrocketed alongside the bombastic launch of VICE on HBO. During this time, the company solidified their edgy approach to journalism through their ability to tap into the viral circulations of digital culture. In April—just a few months before the debut of VICE on HBO—news outlets exploded when a video was released of Dennis Rodman playing basketball with North Korean leader, Kim Jung-Un. While VICE sold this act of “stunt journalism” as “basketball diplomacy,” its status as an act of journalism was hotly contested throughout the coverage. On the one hand, journalists have been notably barred from securing visas to report on North Korea, making this close encounter between basketball's “bad boy” and the “Hermit Kingdom's” leader a major win for digital media's boundary-pushing efforts. On the other hand, journalists criticized the documentary as an act of propaganda for North Korea, suggesting VICE traded journalistic credibility for a shock-driven virality.⁸³ Regardless, everyone concurred that it was “good television,” and even led to a controversial BBC documentary attempting to capitalize on the interest in North Korea.⁸⁴ This act of viral “journalism” acted as an excellent viral advertising campaign for VICE's YouTube channel and VICE on HBO, which aired the full documentary “The Hermit Kingdom” as the season finale.

⁸³ Paul Sandle, “Vice Media Uses Gonzo Sensibility to Win Online,” *Reuters*, November 5, 2013.

⁸⁴ Stuart Kemp, “BBC Refuses to Pull North Korea Documentary – The Hollywood Reporter,” accessed April 15, 2013.

This ambivalence speaks to broader issue with VICE's "hybrid" journalistic-documentary textual forms. While some reviews of VICE's debut on HBO found that the company's bombastic style broke through the monotony of television news shows (which, they argue, are often dominated by equally as sensationalistic and undersourced stories about crime) by showing the human side of global news items, others criticized the series' lack of context and accuracy.⁸⁵ Citing some ways VICE tweaked their stories to make on-screen correspondents look more transgressive, the *New York Times*' Mike Hale ultimately panned the series' attempt to take on "serious journalism." He wrote:

The problem with 'Vice' [sic] isn't its insistent aggrandizement but its excessive softheadedness. It's journalism at the intersection of shallow and gullible, where they meet, high-five and compare tattoos. We get ride-alongs and interviews, though precious little information. The report from the Philippines contains one unsourced statistic about political killings but no discussion of the effects of poverty or the legacy of American colonization.⁸⁶

To this end, Hale raises a broader question about the value of VICE's hybrid, high budget, yet amateur style: in an age when news and reporting are severely underfunded, what will be the result of a news revolution led by hybrid outlets like VICE, whose main goal is virality?

While I sketch an answer to this question in the next two chapters, this bombastic debut as a global youth media company translated into financial success for VICE. VICE's growing presence as a brand that could capture an online-first audience led to a feverish round of investments from advertisers, media conglomerates, and venture capital firms. After

⁸⁵ Robert Lloyd, "Review: 'Vice' Reports Explicitly from around Globe," *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 2013; Mike Hale, "They Bring You the World, in a Way," *The New York Times*, April 4, 2013.

⁸⁶ Hale, "They Bring You the World."

his 2011 tweet, VICE's HBO launch finally piqued Rupert Murdoch's interest, whose 21st Century Fox invested \$70 million for a 5% stake in VICE in August 2013, thereby valuing the company at \$1.4 billion (larger than the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* at the time).⁸⁷ *Advertising Age* also honored VICE as "publisher of the year" for 2013, and they went on to co-produce the first YouTube Music Awards, and be nominated for the company's first of many Emmy Awards.⁸⁸ VICE ended the year by securing an additional \$500 million in investments from venture capital investment firm, Technology Crossover Ventures (TCV) and Disney-owned A&E to expand VICE's global reach through linear television and mobile content partnerships.⁸⁹ This financial track record solidified VICE's standing as the future of news because of its ability to reach a millennial audience, create viral content that was both shocking and insightful, and, most importantly, to offer investors and advertisers a profitable business model for digital news. In response to its successes (as well as likely in response to its critics), VICE used its "war chest" of funding to bulk up its news division, hiring a slate of professional journalists and editors and creating a dedicated Vice News division within the expanding VICE umbrella of channels or "verticals."⁹⁰

As I detail in the next section, VICE's ability to ride the bubbles of emergent digital video markets and digitally distributed news made it an industry front-runner with the highest valuation across the sector. Despite investments in VICE by many of the media's "old guard," it's clear that social media platforms were, by this time, the primary driver of these

⁸⁷ Ben Quinn, "Rupert Murdoch Firm Dips into Hipsters' Bible with \$70m Stake in Vice," *The Guardian*, August 17, 2013.

⁸⁸ Simon Dumenco and Malika Toure, "Ad Age's Magazine A-List: Vice Media Is Publishing Company of the Year," *Ad Age*, October 21, 2013.

⁸⁹ Natasha Lomas, "Vice Media Confirms Another \$250M Investment, From New Investor TCV," *TechCrunch* (blog), September 4, 2014; Jonathan Mahler, "Vice Media Stakes Future on A&E Networks Deal," *The New York Times*, August 29, 2014.

⁹⁰ Alex Weprin, "With \$500 Million War Chest, What's next for Vice Media?," *Politico*, September 5, 2014.

new media companies' traffic. While Peretti's BuzzFeed heavily leaned on Facebook to serve up its viral quizzes and listicles while building up its recently formed news division, VICE's growth depended heavily on the shareability and accessibility of YouTube and benefited from both gaining ad revenue splits from YouTube and creating seamless digital video ads for big brand names.

While this investment fervor and turn to hard news seems to be synonymous with new media companies' "growing up" and cultural relevance to millennial audiences, the clearer underlying reason for this boom in investments is simple: the continued rush to monetize a burgeoning digital video market. Writing for PandoDaily in October 2013, editor-in-chief Sarah Lacy, categorized this investment fervor as "content's 'holy shit' moment," marking advertisers' embrace of born-digital content. She wrote:

Investors are betting that new media companies, especially ones that produce video, can grab more dollars from television advertisers, who are shifting more of their budgets to digital. As devices and platforms converge, content from these new media outlets can be seen on smartphones, tablets, TVs, and desktop computers, taking their advertising wherever they go. These companies are also increasingly global, with audiences that cross borders. The Internet is the world's best delivery truck. Suddenly 'niches' can command audiences of tens of millions, not hundreds of thousands.⁹¹

Seeing the rise in popularity of these companies, media giants like NBCUniversal, 21st Century Fox, and Disney raced to invest in digital news start-ups as a way to stake their claim to what promised to be the future of media.

⁹¹ "Vox's New Mega-Round Puts a Bow on Content's Holy-Shit Moment," *PandoDaily*, October 16, 2013.

Video was attractive to advertisers precisely because of its parity with ad spending on television and digital media companies' enthusiasm to create sponsored content and act as in-house creative agencies for brands looking to reach millennial audiences. Not everyone was convinced that sponsored journalism and journalism funded partially by ad revenue from clickbait-y viral content would be the best model moving forward. In 2014, David Carr speculated on whether or not the rise of digital news start-ups pointed to a bubble that would eventually fold under market saturation and declining advertising rates.⁹² While there were varying levels of faith across the media company heads Carr interviewed, most of them expressed what seemed like genuine belief that pursuing "stories that matter" would inevitably lead to dedicated audiences and profitability.⁹³ Regardless of these speculations, the multimedia funding models crafted by VICE and BuzzFeed renewed a struggling journalism industry. As mentioned earlier, Pew Research found that digital-first outlets accounted for roughly 3000 of a staggering 5000 digital news jobs in the US in 2014. They also increased the number of international bureaus thanks to the multi-million-dollar investments detailed above, reversing a decades-long trend of shuttering foreign bureaus and scaling back international reporting efforts.⁹⁴

The rise of smartphones, platform redesigns that center pushing content to scrolling users, and a burgeoning interest in on-the-ground, viral reporting created a market for new ventures in news. VICE's viral successes coincided with a rising interest in digital-first news geared toward a millennial, cord-cutting audience. On the one hand, the rise of digital-first, millennial-made news spoke to a growing cultural desire to reinvent news in a multitude of

⁹² David Carr, "As I Was Saying About Web Journalism ... a Bubble, or a Lasting Business?," *New York Times*, January 30, 2014.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Anderson and Caumont, "How Social Media Reshaping the News."

ways. While VICE privileged “immersive” documentaries that presented up-close views of ongoing global news stories, BuzzFeed invested in a small team of (more text-based) investigative reporters, and newcomers like Vox News developed an “explainer” video style that repackaged, commented on, or explained news stories rather than invest in new reporting. At the center of each of these endeavors (and countless more) was a pursuit of media production through the lens of a technology company. As I unpack in the next chapter, VICE’s hold on viral, visceral videos, seamless story production and repackaging practices, and digital insights into its cross-platform and global audiences tied VICE’s approach to a growing cultural dependency on virality as a mediation of the popular (and therefore valuable). BuzzFeed and Vox both developed innovative content management systems that sparked waves of investment, allowing each to claim they were more tech companies than media companies. This blend of subjective, opinionated, (and increasingly viral) news and technological development created what many denied was a bubble around digital news in the mid-2010’s, while also allowing these companies to dodge questions about their journalistic responsibilities and standards.

2015-2018: A Metric(s) Failure: The News Bubble Bursts

Bolstered by their use in various social movements, platforms like YouTube/Google and Facebook made deliberate moves to center their sites as web users’ portals to television, news, and social networking all in one. A 2013 *Columbia Journalism Review* article titled “Streams of Consciousness” argued that the future of news would be increasingly mediated by social media platforms, stating:

Some folks might think of YouTube, which is owned by Google, as a repository for silly homemade videos and illegally posted songs, but it is increasingly a source of news. One-third of YouTube searches are for news-related terms, according to the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2011), and 51 percent of the most-watched videos bore a news organization's logo. According to YouTube itself, 7,000 hours of news-related video are uploaded to the site every day. And the site's overall usage numbers are extraordinary: More than 1 billion unique visitors per month watch 4 billion hours of video (the site does not release audience statistics segmented by age). What's more, the eight-year-old site is still growing: Pageviews are up 25 percent since the beginning of 2012.⁹⁵

Using rising interest in citizen journalism and user-generated content of news items, YouTube's post-2011 focus on building dedicated channels helped move the chains from a search-based mode of connecting users to video to a push-based one similar to television. Describing this transition, YouTube's director of content partnerships Tom Sly stated, "The noun of yesterday on YouTube was video, and the noun of the future is channels... We want people to actually come and subscribe to channels—to say, 'I want to know the latest and greatest from Vice [sic].'"⁹⁶ According to the article's author, Ben Adler, this initiative marked the moment when "YouTube itself becomes a news source," stating that "before you had to know what news you were looking for, now you can subscribe to the BBC's channel and see all of the BBC's videos posted in reverse chronological order when you log in."⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Ben Adler, "Streams of Consciousness," *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 2013.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Ultimately, news acted as a product for YouTube to achieve its stated goal of monopolizing the relationship between viewers and digital videos. The rise of mobile social media use thanks to the proliferation of smartphones during this time encouraged companies like BuzzFeed and VICE to develop close relationships to a centralizing market for attention. As younger news readers and viewers moved from newspapers and television to search engines and social media platforms, floundering legacy news publications turned to user-generated content and distribution deals with youth-oriented content brands like VICE, especially if they could deliver on content that could go viral across the social web. News became a premium product to differentiate monetizable content from riskier user-generated media as a way to entice advertisers to move their campaigns online.

To summarize the impact of the “news video bubble” moment, it showcased a time when resources went into chasing new media ventures rather than stabilizing the journalism industry by pursuing less commercial or advertising-funded journalism funding models. Furthermore, it tied journalistic innovation to digital platforms, solidified virality and digital metrics as a proof of good journalism and offered a capitalistic solution to an industry in crisis. This period solidified the ties between new journalism efforts and platform dynamics rather than building up nascent grassroots journalism efforts from the ground up, as envisioned by the Indymedia movement of the late 1990s.⁹⁸ These ties would eventually result in widespread destabilization as Facebook and Google/YouTube showed their limited commitments to building meaningful news ecosystems on their platforms. This section zooms in on the effects of news organizations’ and digital media companies’ overreliance on

⁹⁸ Despite setting up a global network of citizen journalistic, Indymedia centers began closing in 2005 when social media platforms began to proliferate. It should be noted that, despite Indymedia’s distinctly anti-corporate stance, it also faced problems of inaccuracy in their amateur reports, raising questions about a sustainable model for alternative journalism.

platforms for distribution—what many journalism and media scholars today have called platformization—in order to show the ways that unregulated and opaque digital metrics, combined with platforms’ allegiance to advertisers and their own bottom lines, created the conditions for an industry-wide news bubble deflation.

By January 2016, VICE became synonymous with connecting an online-first millennial generation to news content. Writing for *Columbia Journalism Review*, Jack Murtha begs a growing glut of millennial-focused news media ventures to “stop comparing your new media venture to VICE.”⁹⁹ The article details the wide swath of start-up and legacy media companies getting into producing millennial-focused news and documentary videos for digital distribution. In a push to build new platforms for mobile video streaming, Hearst and Verizon announced they were “teaming up to launch a mobile video channel that will act as ‘Vice for the red states’” for their go90 platform (for which VICE was also commissioned to create content).¹⁰⁰ Additionally, Murtha calls CNN’s video network, Great Big Story, a copycat of VICE’s editorial stance and style, citing striking similarities between its tagline (“awesome, untold and inspirational stories about new frontiers, the human condition, planet earth, tastes and flavors”) and VICE’s claim to “expose the absurdity of the modern condition.”¹⁰¹ Murtha asserts that outlets like Mic, BuzzFeed, The Economist, and Netflix were also “reported to either be mirroring, or taking on, the Brooklyn media giant.”¹⁰² The cultural impact of VICE traced by this article is far-reaching, ranging from legacy institutions like CNN to more community-focused digital spaces like WorldStarHipHop, who cited

⁹⁹ Jack Murtha, “Stop Comparing Your New Media Venture to Vice,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, accessed July 17, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

VICE's documentaries covering underrepresented communities as inspiration for launching their own video series on inner city youth in Miami.¹⁰³

Murtha's reporting places VICE's success at the center of a growing competition to serve millennial audiences with video news. As Murtha details, video news comes to the fore as the future of millennial news because of its higher CPMs, remixability for different platform distribution, and attractiveness for advertisers looking to cash in on the millennial market. VICE was at the center of this bubble because of its ability to garner interest from investors and rack up awards for its much more buttoned-up, but still boundary-pushing news output. By 2017, two \$200 million investments from Disney and a private equity deal with TPG pushed VICE's valuation to its all-time high of \$5.7 billion, triggering significant debate about whether VICE would go public or sell itself to a media giant like Disney. On the surface, VICE had succeeded where many legacy brands had failed over the years—building a successful business model for digital news by crafting a distinct brand that resonated with a globally connected, cord-cutting, yet politics-interested audience of underserved millennials. Yet, its independence from “corporate media” was also part of the branded appeal to viewers, signaling some confusion about VICE's positionality within a growing field of competitors. Regardless, VICE's success story for investors led to an industry-wide embrace of digital distribution and expensive video production. VICE's main competitor, BuzzFeed, followed VICE by betting on digital video, and by 2016, half of BuzzFeed's 5 billion cross-platform monthly views came from digital video.¹⁰⁴ Following VICE's 2013 launch of its VICE News channel, BuzzFeed also split its news division from

¹⁰³ Dan Rys, “Can WorldStarHipHop's Documentaries Help Save The Inner Cities?” *XXL Mag*, August 12, 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Noah Robischon, “How BuzzFeed's Jonah Peretti Is Building A 100-Year Media Company,” *Fast Company*, February 16, 2016.

its entertainment offerings in 2016 and continued to hire more reporters, including bulking up its video news production. By November, NBCUniversal invested a second round of two \$200 million investments in BuzzFeed, along with emerging video and content network, Vox.

Underneath this reporting on the zeitgeist of VICE, however, is a hidden story of increasing platform dependence and crises in digital metrics. While these investments signaled the viability of a new media future led by this handful of millennial-focused companies, questions also started to rise about their profitability and sustainability. As early as 2014, the *New York Times* reported on how the multi-million-dollar investments that inflated companies like VICE's worth were also what pushed them to grow quickly, requiring sites to either "perpetually increase traffic at a steady clip, or innovate and move into new and potentially more lucrative areas like so-called native advertising and video."¹⁰⁵ The CPMs for non-video advertising were plummeting, pushing digital media companies to sink money into diversifying their production and potential advertising revenues. BuzzFeed had opened a BuzzFeed Video content production arm in Los Angeles in 2012 (oddly the same time that VICE's viral videos started gaining industry traction) to connect with entertainment-based talent networks centered there. By 2016, they ramped up video production and renamed the video endeavor BuzzFeed Motion Pictures.¹⁰⁶ This signaled a strategic move away from their dependency on social media platforms for distribution as they expanded into creating commissioned or licensed content for Facebook, YouTube, streaming

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. The article also speculates on the potential impacts of over relying on social media platforms for distribution; as early as 2011, BuzzFeed witnessed moments when Facebook tinkered with the NewsFeed algorithm and caused a massive drop in their readership metrics. See also, Ben Smith, *Traffic: Genius, Rivalry, and Delusion in the Billion-Dollar Race to Go Viral* (Penguin, 2023).

¹⁰⁶ Natalie Jarvey, "BuzzFeed Motion Pictures: An Inside Look," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 14, 2016.

services, and television networks, with the goal of becoming a full-service media production house.¹⁰⁷

In an uncanny parallel, VICE similarly utilized its investments from both tech and media conglomerates to expand its digital video reach to find new revenue streams. Using A&E's \$250 million investment in 2013 and an enormous \$400 million investment from A&E co-owner, Disney, VICE launched its own cable channel, Viceland (later VICE TV), in 2016.¹⁰⁸ Smith also utilized the company's connections with global television providers to broker licensing and partnership deals around the world through a combination of linear television and mobile video streaming.¹⁰⁹ Critical questions still lurked behind these sky-high valuations and cross-media expansions for many media companies: What do these strategic moves to take digital content into television say about a purported digital media revolution in news? And what value will they bring to already-circulating questions about these companies' profitability in the long-term? In an article speculating on BuzzFeed's first missed revenue target in 2015, skeptics close to the company criticized the move back to television as one born out of desperation rather than innovation, stating that BuzzFeed's business strategy was akin to "driving in the dark at 60 miles an hour, without headlights" and noting that "in the world of new media and tech, that's better than standing still."¹¹⁰

While CEOs Jonah Peretti and Shane Smith offered a rosy glimpse into growing media

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. See also: Smith, *Traffic*.

¹⁰⁸ Mike Hale, "Viceland, a New Cable Channel, Aims to Stand Out," *The New York Times*, February 28, 2016.

¹⁰⁹ The Paley Center for Media, "VICE's Shane Smith Talks to Jeff Jarvis: Full Event," YouTube Video, December 3, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qHjln3yZFs>; Tow Knight Center, "Smith on VICE Media's Business Plan, Net Neutrality," YouTube Video, December 8, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkzL8F37Jfo>.

¹¹⁰ Peter Kafka, "BuzzFeed Didn't Cut Its 2016 Forecast in Half, Says BuzzFeed Chair Ken Lerer," *Vox*, April 12, 2016. VICE's Suroosh Alvi would later echo this growth-driven recklessness, stating "The reality is that there was never any specific plan that took us anywhere... We have not followed any path other than growth. We didn't adhere to any business philosophy other than 'survive.'" From Wiedeman, "A Company Built on a Bluff."

empires, the clearer motivations for diversifying distribution were tri-fold: First, they sought more revenue from content licensing due to an increasingly crowded digital video economy; second, they needed to sidestep questions of their growing dependency on Google/YouTube and Facebook; and lastly, they needed to deflect from questions about reach and monetization as digital metrics began to formalize.

In fact, the news boom of 2011-2015 dissipated because unregulated digital metrics practices came under fire while platforms like Facebook and Google actively worked to increase their dominance over digital video advertising revenue. Starting in 2015, Twitter and Facebook developed features to compete with YouTube for content and ad revenue from digital video. Twitter launched “Moments” in 2015 using YouTube’s advertising model to share revenue from pre-roll ads with creators but undercutting YouTube’s 45% share by offering to only keep 30% of the revenue from video pre-roll ads.¹¹¹ Facebook also started adding short video clips to users’ newsfeeds in 2015 while developing their “Watch” feature. Partially driven to compete with YouTube, these new video-driven features on Facebook and Twitter were also responsive to changing audience metrics: when platforms (and advertisers) started to value engagement metrics (such as likes, comments, shares, etc.) over view or watch metrics, video stood out as more engaging and shareable than text.¹¹² Similarly, advertisers were growing more interested in video due to older “lean-back” assumptions about audience engagement: brands assume that consumers will pay more attention to an ad preceding a video than one appearing before or around text-based articles.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Peter Kafka, “Facebook Is Building Its Own YouTube Inside Facebook,” *Vox*, October 13, 2015.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ See John West, “Publishers Are Desperately Pivoting to Video—but They Should Be Standing up to Facebook,” *Quartz*, July 26, 2017. It should also be noted that platforms were becoming the internet’s “front pages,” which also encouraged a scroll-by reading method for text articles. The parity between digital news companies’ alleged “clickbait-y” titles and struggling site referral traffic gestures toward a shift in consumption practices around text-based news.

By the mid-2010s, competition for attention in the space of digital streaming video spanned across entertainment industries, telecommunications carriers, social media platforms, and tech-media hybrid companies like Netflix, creating increasing competition for content, advertising, and attention online. Wider access to broadband and mobile streaming via smartphones created new profit horizons for each of these stakeholders. These battles over industry share also impacted news ecosystems, as evidenced by companies like VICE and BuzzFeed positioning themselves to ramp up video production in hopes of expanding their own bottom lines by providing content for a variety of these distribution portals. However, two catastrophic events in the mid-2010's broke the digital video news bubble demonstrated above: the first was YouTube's shifting priorities and subsequent "adpocalypse" in 2017, and the second was the Facebook-led "pivot to video" that ultimately drove a wave of layoffs, restructuring, and widespread precarity across journalistic businesses.

While YouTube's channels initiative was the foundational way that YouTube began to meaningfully monetize creators/digital video, these same creators were raising concerns about not making enough money from their channels as early as 2013. Peter Kafka reported that, despite growing viewership numbers, YouTube's largest creators were still not making much money off of their ad-share model, with many creators turning toward finding other distribution portals for their content, seeking out "brand integrations" to generate their own advertising revenue, or trying to find ways to direct users back to their own sites where they could get higher CPMs for video ads outside of YouTube.¹¹⁴ The video bubble created by YouTube's channel initiative began to fizzle out as creators discovered that YouTube's

¹¹⁴ Peter Kafka, "YouTube's Show-Me-the-Money Problem," *AllThingsD*, March 4, 2013.

funding model was never geared toward helping boost creators. VICE's position within this ecosystem was no different, with Smith stating in the article that relying on YouTube was not going to be their monetization strategy.¹¹⁵

Early moves by companies like VICE and BuzzFeed to start diversifying their distribution and monetization strategies proved helpful when confronted with YouTube's infrastructural power during 2017's adpocalypse. Despite the initial excitement around the digital video news bubble in the early 2010's, the shadow cast by the 2016 U.S. election killed the market for news on the platform entirely. Rising criticism of social media platforms' role in spreading misinformation and extremist views pushed YouTube to take a side on whether it was, in fact, a media company with responsibilities to police hate speech and misinformation. As Philip M. Napoli and Robyn Caplan argue, however, platforms across the board doubled-down on strategically positioning themselves as neutral technology companies rather than media companies to skirt regulation.¹¹⁶ Despite vying to become TV in its earlier years, YouTube skirted responsibilities associated with "media companies" by introducing automated content moderation services that allowed advertisers to opt out of being programmed next to content coded with a set of keywords. While there has been rampant criticism about how these "block lists" that automatically demonetize "non-advertiser-friendly" content tends to negatively impact marginalized creators, one of the major keywords that ended up on these blocklist was "news."¹¹⁷

YouTube struggled to navigate these critical issues in its news video ecosystem. Meanwhile, Facebook was making its own moves to become a central hub for consuming

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Napoli and Caplan, "Why Media Companies Insist."

¹¹⁷ Randy Cantz, "Adpocalypse: How YouTube Demonetization Imperils the Future of Free Speech," *Berkeley Political Review*. May 1 (2019).

news. By the early 2010's, Facebook was the largest avenue through which people found and discussed news, leading to industry-wide anxieties about depending on Facebook as a primary distribution platform. A Facebook-driven distribution strategy forces news companies to relinquish their ability to gain ad revenue from their own site traffic and makes them dependent on Facebook's opaque internal metrics for information about their reach. Seeing this as an opportunity rather than a crisis in journalism's funding structure, Facebook launched its own dedicated news feature, Instant Articles, in 2015. On the Instant Articles tab, Facebook paid news publishers to create original stories for the platform in exchange for wider distribution to Facebook users and faster loading times on the app. News organizations in the business of aggregating viral hits were optimistic about this partnership for a Facebook-forward news distribution model, with BuzzFeed's Jonah Peretti notably optimistic that Facebook would help publishers like his monetize their audiences on the platform.¹¹⁸

Some of Peretti's enthusiasm about a Facebook-driven news ecology also came from the platform's expansions into video. In the early 2010's Facebook started introducing more video content into its Newsfeed algorithm, launching its own embedded video player in 2014.¹¹⁹ That same year, Facebook started reporting large video viewership numbers as its Newsfeed began to show increasingly more video as a way to draw advertising revenue away from YouTube. According to *The Atlantic's* Alexis C. Madrigal and Robinson Meyer, Facebook's astronomical video viewership numbers "was attractive to media companies, and especially to those funded by venture capitalists, who often demand fast-growing traffic

¹¹⁸ Throughout the various shrinkages, Peretti remained firm that platform companies like Facebook would help create sustainable journalism models. In his memo on the closing of BuzzFeed News, he wrote that his passion for tech-driven news "made me slow to accept that the big platforms wouldn't provide the distribution or financial support required to support premium, free journalism purpose-built for social media." See, Clare Malone, "Jonah Peretti Has Regrets About BuzzFeed News," *The New Yorker*, May 4, 2023. See also BuzzFeed News' editor-in-chief's history: Ben Smith, *Traffic*.

¹¹⁹ Cunningham and Craig, *Social Media Entertainment*.

numbers.”¹²⁰ News companies The Young Turks, BuzzFeed, VICE, and more suddenly found that videos uploaded directly to Facebook got massive traction, with some citing numbers like 7 million views in one day or up to 23 million views over the course of two days.¹²¹ Seeing this explosion in views, news companies across the board reorganized to prioritize making more videos for digital distribution across platforms.

This massive “success” continued as Facebook used these numbers to court digital content companies to build a library of Facebook-original content. It also paid news publishers like BuzzFeed and celebrities to use its new Facebook Live feature in 2015. In doing so, Facebook delivered viral videos with millions of viewers, epitomized by the BuzzFeed Live video during which roughly 800,000 Facebook users tuned in to watch staffers explode a watermelon using rubber bands. Some optimists saw this as a moment when Facebook video eclipsed the power of television, while others continued to point out the differences between digital “views” metrics and viewer-based television ratings.¹²²

This metrics crisis came to a head in 2017 when the “pivot to video” came crashing down. While also fielding widespread criticism about the rise of “fake news,” misinformation, and election tampering during the 2016 election, Facebook’s video view metrics came under fire in 2017 when a group of advertisers sued Facebook for inflating its video viewership metrics by as much as 900%.¹²³ Facebook’s view counts were questioned

¹²⁰ Alexis C. Madrigal and Robinson Meyer, “The Facebook-Driven Video Push May Have Cost 483 Journalists Their Jobs,” *The Atlantic*, October 18, 2018.

¹²¹ Erin Griffith, “Why YouTube is Spending Mega Ad Dollars to Promote Vice News,” *Fortune*, June 19, 2014; Erin Griffith, “How Facebook’s Video-Traffic Explosion Is Shaking up the Advertising World,” *Fortune*, June 3, 2015.

¹²² Charlie Warzel, “Facebook Drives Massive New Surge Of Traffic To Publishers,” *BuzzFeed News*, November 20, 2023; Peter Kafka, “Old Media Says New Media’s Video Numbers Are Bogus,” *Vox*, October 27, 2015.

¹²³ Chris Welch, “Facebook May Have Knowingly Inflated Its Video Metrics for over a Year,” *The Verge*, October 17, 2018; Peter Kafka, “Facebook Says It Miscalculated More Metrics, but It’s Telling Advertisers Not to Worry,” *Vox*, November 16, 2016.

early on for the problematic practice of counting any watchtime over three seconds as a view (YouTube's views start at 30 seconds in comparison), and the lawsuit alleged that flawed calculations produced juiced up average watchtime numbers that misled advertisers and content creators about the reach of their content. These advertisers also alleged that Facebook knew its calculations were inflated as early as 2015 but did nothing to correct the issue in a bid to make Facebook Video look more competitive than YouTube.¹²⁴

The impacts of Facebook's viewership inflation were disastrous for news publishers. Madrigal and Robinson estimated that 300-500 journalists lost their jobs as growth-seeking media companies laid off editors and reporters in order to hire more staff to create video for Facebook.¹²⁵ They wrote:

During the period of purported wrongdoing, from July 2015 to June 2016, journalists and newsroom leaders across the country worked to cover an unprecedented presidential campaign in an information landscape that Facebook was constantly, and erratically, transforming. Even if, as Facebook argues, it did not knowingly inflate metrics, it set up new and fast-changing incentives for video that altered the online ad market as a whole. As media companies desperately tried to do what Facebook wanted, many made the disastrous decision to 'pivot to video,' laying off reporters and editors by the dozen. And when views plunged and video's poor return on investment

¹²⁴ Welch, "Facebook May Have."

¹²⁵ This number notably didn't account for struggling local newspapers that were deprioritized or shuttered while their parent companies allocated resources to digital video. The authors state that local newspapers lost 7000 jobs between 2014-2018. See Madrigal and Meyer, "The Facebook-Driven Video Push."

became more apparent, some companies pivoted back, firing video producers by the dozens.¹²⁶

To add insult to injury, Facebook also decided to sidestep questions about its editorial responsibilities after the 2016 election by eventually changing their News Feed algorithm to prioritize posts from everyday users and deprioritize publishers' posts, including news stories and videos, altogether. This left news and media companies that made big bets on Facebook Video searching for alternative routes to distribute their growing content libraries.

VICE's fall from grace happened simultaneously with the growing criticality towards digital news in a post-2016 world. It's clear that circulating conversations around fake news and misinformation led to widespread de-prioritization and de-monetization of news on social media platforms as advertisers feared finding their ads algorithmically placed next to extremist or inflammatory content. This counts for one loss of revenue as social media platforms pivoted away from news for fear of advertiser abandonment and federal regulation. Furthermore, Facebook's inflated video metrics spawned a speculative mis-valuation of viewership that misled investors and news organizations alike about their reach on the platform, leaving many scrambling in the wake of this "pivot to video" to reorganize their newsrooms in a context in which audiences depended on platform-distributed news offered for free on a variety of platforms.¹²⁷

Additionally, scrutiny about digital metrics also placed VICE in hot water when *Variety* reported on a controversial practice wherein digital publishers like VICE "rolled up"

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Despite these effects, there have been many "pivots to video" since this event, with TikTok's rise central to spawning more waves of video production prioritization. David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell suggest that it's a combination of platforms and publishers' management decisions that have perpetuated this vicious cycle, often at the cost of making journalistic labor more precarious. See, David B Nieborg and Thomas Poell, "The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (November 1, 2018): 4275–92.

traffic from clickbait-y sites like OMGFacts and Distractify.com into their audience numbers to boost the perceived size of their reach to advertisers.¹²⁸ As demonstrated in *New York* magazine's bombshell piece covering VICE's murky business ethics, VICE often used their multi-platform distribution strategy to sidestep questions about the size of the company's actual audience, using deals with mobile carriers, global linear television channels, and social media traffic as ways to obfuscate its actual reach.¹²⁹ Furthermore, Viceland's launch proved to be an expensive flop that poked holes in VICE's claim to reach an enormous millennial audience. While Viceland acted as a way to sell packaged shows to global linear television networks and a means to chase higher CPMs in television, the channel's ratings never improved despite the company sinking a large amount of what Smith called his "Disney/A&E war chest" into producing series for the channel. From the history above, VICE appears at the center of news organizations' focus on video, with the hype around millennial-focused digital media companies' growth driving management at legacy publications toward growing more dependent on social media platforms for distribution.

Innovation's Underbelly: "Media is not Tech"

While outlets like VICE and BuzzFeed found significant video hits and continued to win Pulitzers, Emmys, and other critical awards for their journalism, 2017 proved to be the year the news video bubble burst. Despite various attempts to experiment with their news and video content, VICE continued to lay off more staff year after year, eventually filing for bankruptcy in 2023. The investment fervor around these new "social news" companies

¹²⁸ Lucia Moses, "The Favorite Publisher Trick That Makes Their Digital Audiences Look Bigger and Younger," *Digiday*, February 18, 2016; Andrew Wallenstein, "Vice Media Web Traffic Plunges 17% in February, Sunk by Risky Strategy," *Variety*, March 21, 2016.

¹²⁹ Wiedeman, "A Company Built on a Bluff."

pushed news publishers who were less dependent on social media, like the *New York Times*, to spend vital resources on the equivalent of shiny digital object chasing rather than investing in more in-depth reporting. The platform-driven “pivot to video” and decimated digital advertising market is cited widely as the reasons behind many news publishers’ strategic moves to use subscriptions and paywalls to fund their journalism and keep their audiences on their own sites. While Facebook and Google/YouTube’s years-long initiatives to court digital media companies and then cannibalize their audiences certainly places a large share of the blame on unregulated platforms, companies like VICE—as well as the funding free-for-all inspired by their rise—also bear some responsibility for pushing the industry towards what David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell call “the platformization of the news.”¹³⁰ In their article that tracks the differing effects of platformization, or “the replacement of two-sided market structures with complex multi-sided platform configurations, dominated by big platform corporations,” in the news and gaming industries, Nieborg and Poell affirm that platform-driven news has participated in making news a “contingent cultural commodity” subject to the network effects of social media platforms.¹³¹ The datafication of news content that comes with playing by platforms’ often opaque rules and obscure data practices also serves to affirm platforms’ central position, which Nieborg and Poell find has widespread economic *and* cultural implications for the news industry in particular.¹³²

For this last section, I want to explore these deeper implications by examining two major events that signaled VICE’s eventual fall from its once coveted position within news and digital media. While weathering criticism about VICE’s viability in light of their use of

¹³⁰ Nieborg and Poell, “The Platformization of Cultural Production.”

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

controversial audience metrics, the company also experienced significant criticism from both inside and outside of its Brooklyn headquarters. The informality of VICE as a workplace raised numerous red flags throughout its history, particularly regarding its claim to journalistic innovation, toxic labor practices, and sketchy business models. Throughout VICE's history, reporters have raised questions about how thin the wall was between the news division and the company's in-house creative and advertising services. Chris Ip, writing for *Columbia Journalism Review* in 2015, had confirmed sources citing multiple times when stories were "killed" due to conflict with VICE's brand partners.¹³³ Furthermore, Ip goes on to raise questions about VICE's labor practices, featuring many freelance reporters' experiences with VICE's lack of formal structure. Often, a VICE employee would reach out to freelancers for story background or research and then never pay for the work.¹³⁴

Furthermore, the lack of editorial oversight and general ethics paved the way for innovative content, but also a lot of risk, endangerment, and controversies. On a journalistic level, VICE's award-winning documentaries were not safely produced, with many VICE on HBO employees later claiming that "'it's a miracle no one died,' given the company's willingness to send correspondents into dangerous situations."¹³⁵ Other instances showcased a lack of clear boundaries around journalistic ethics: one VICE producer got as far as telling a woman the company would "pay for her abortion if she was willing to be filmed" in order to get a story on abortion restrictions in Texas; another Canadian senior editor for VICE's music vertical, Noisey, was arrested for allegedly recruiting other VICE Canada employees

¹³³ Chris Ip, "The Cult of Vice," *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 2015.

¹³⁴ This type of exploitative behavior of freelance workers and even regular users is a common theme in BuzzFeed's history, as well. Notably, many of their quizzes that brought in a lot of ad revenue were made by unpaid site users; on the journalism side, multiple BuzzFeed reporters were accused of plagiarism.

¹³⁵ Wiedeman, "A Company Built on a Bluff."

to smuggle cocaine through an airport in Australia in order to write a story on illegal drug muling.¹³⁶

On a managerial side, VICE's lack of a formal structure led to widespread financial mismanagement. Smith and many other senior managers spent freely to keep up the appearances of being flush with cash for investors. Despite exorbitant spending at company events, the majority of VICE's workforce was being paid bottom-tier wages. An expose on all of VICE's inflated antics reported that one "senior manager once joked that the company's hiring strategy had a "22 Rule": "Hire 22-year-olds, pay them \$22,000, and work them 22 hours a day."¹³⁷ Inspired by unionization efforts at sites like Gawker, VICE workers began organizing for a union after employees watched Shane Smith spend lavishly on a chartered helicopter, a \$400,000 dinner, and a \$23 million mansion in Santa Monica while they were averaging \$30,000 salaries in an increasingly expensive New York City. Notably, VICE Union workers chose to unionize with the WGA-East rather than the more typical News Guild, signaling their comparative struggles with other creative workers in the media industries.¹³⁸

The biggest fallout, however, came when the *New York Times* exposed the falsities behind VICE's increasingly progressive brand image. Coming on the heels of the #MeToo movement, this expose revealed the toxic and misogynistic "boys club" antics behind VICE's revolutionary image. Emily Steel's investigation unearthed four settlements involving claims of sexual harassment, with more than two dozen other women describing "a top-down ethos

¹³⁶ Wiedeman, "A Company Built on a Bluff"; Kate Knibbs, "'Worked at Vice Then Went to Jail': How a Bunch of Canadian Hipsters Wound Up Smuggling Cocaine (and Getting Caught)," *The Ringer*, December 2, 2019.

¹³⁷ Wiedeman, "A Company Built on a Bluff."

¹³⁸ Michael Calderone, "Vice Media Votes To Unionize As Trend In Digital Media Continues," *HuffPost*, August 7, 2015; Anna Heyward, "Joining the Ranks," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 30, 2018; Dave McNary, "Vice Media Unionizes With Writers Guild East and Editors Guild," *Variety*, September 21, 2017.

of male entitlement at Vice [sic], where women said they felt like just another party favor at an organization where partying often was an extension of the job.”¹³⁹ The report uncovered a toxic workplace buoyed by a “non-traditional workplace agreement,” in which women often were harassed, assaulted, coerced via quid-pro-quos, and underpaid compared to male staffers. While the company made moves to change its image by firing many senior staffers and replacing Shane Smith with A&E’s Nancy Dubuc as CEO, VICE never seemed to recover from this blow to its reputation.¹⁴⁰

Culturally, this unruly and informal environment attracted several talented and creative people who were looking to make their name in the media world and push the boundaries of journalism, explore underreported stories, and create meaningful content for an audience searching for authenticity. Like stories of the early days at tech companies like Facebook, VICE lacked internal hierarchy and oversight that both led to its biggest hits and welcomed in exploitation, harassment, abuse, and overwork.

Journalistically, VICE’s success speaks to a critical juncture in the journalism industry wrought by the advent of digital technologies. From the vantage point of the late 2010’s, Facebook’s failed “pivot to video” and its impacts on an already precarious digital journalism ecology are clearly a pivotal moment in the histories of digital news giants like VICE, BuzzFeed, Vox, and many others that are now facing downsizing, buyouts, or (in VICE’s case) bankruptcy. As much as Facebook’s ill-advised efforts should be examined for their direct impacts on online news, my research shows that this narrow focus simplifies complex industry positionings and obscures the market dynamics informing Facebook’s

¹³⁹ Emily Steel, “At Vice, Cutting-Edge Media and Allegations of Old-School Sexual Harassment,” *New York Times*, December 23, 2017.

¹⁴⁰ Of course, Smith still maintained his stake in the company and leadership role as Chair over Dubuc as CEO.

haphazard video push and publishers' optimism in tying their distribution to such volatile platforms. VICE's company history reveals a desire for new iterations of journalism facilitated by the unregulated space of the Internet. Despite its controversial business practices and ethics, VICE offered young journalists (and aspirational hustlers) a space that encouraged experimentation and boundary-pushing and lead legacy media organizations toward also experimenting with new formats. As spaces like BuzzFeed News and VICE close or go bankrupt, there will now be fewer places for young journalists to start out in the industry that encourage boundary-pushing journalism or pursue non-traditional stories and beats. Bringing our attention back full circle, the digital news boom was responsible for adding 3000-5000 jobs in journalism in 2012—the closure of these outlets raises questions about the growing precarity and consolidation of journalism writ large.¹⁴¹

Conclusion: Viral News

The uncertainty of what digital media—specifically digital video and news/publishing—would look like drove a frenzy of investment from all sectors of the entrenched media economy. The rise of digital video streaming created a platform for struggling creatives who were fired from or existed at the margins of the creative economy to build their own communities with little cost. From 2007-2016, digital platforms were at the center of the “produser” revolution, cashing in on circulating desires to create a different (and more “authentic”) media system in journalism, publishing, and entertainment. Platforms like YouTube built their own structures to centralize earlier experiments in digital creativity and

¹⁴¹ Of course this is compounded by companies like BuzzFeed's embrace of AI to cheaply write digital content—a further level of digital exploitation and cannibalization on top of its history with plagiarism and unpaid work.

journalism, such as the Indymedia network and independent web series. As Patrick Vondereau notes, YouTube's focus on user-generated content was a band-aid solution to build the site quickly and cheaply, later introducing and promoting "premium" (read: advertiser-friendly) content to attract advertisers away from cable and broadcast.¹⁴²

Throughout its growth as a global digital media brand, VICE similarly positioned itself in the "messy middle" of an unregulated early digital video space. As a company, VICE capitalized on media conglomerates like Viacom's anxieties about losing an increasingly online young male audience by acting as an incubator for edgy, internet-influenced content. As an incubator, VICE had free reign to experiment with whatever content they'd like, from which MTV/Viacom could select and repackage content to air in different markets while simultaneously learning from VICE's insights into digital video hits and misses. "Incubation" here shielded MTV/Viacom from VICE's edgiest work that may have dissuaded advertisers while giving the conglomerate a "low-cost laboratory" to rethink a digital strategy in a media ecology in which viewers sought out niche, transgressive content online for free. While claiming to be the "new guard" of media—in a way similar to YouTube's bait-and-switch of "Broadcast Yourself"—VICE kept its edgy, internet-focused brand alive while adopting older, remediated business strategies from television. Under Tom Freston's guidance, VICE capitalized on the chaos of a "new medium" via its countercultural branding and edgy content but reached into a much older bag of television tricks through a simple business model built on advertiser-sponsored channels and licensing.

This critical "crisis historiography" of the early industrial gray areas around digital video markets challenges histories of digital platforms and digital news organizations that

¹⁴² Vondereau, "The Video Bubble."

chart their rise as cultural disruptors or key innovators known for championing user power and digital affordances. Instead, by starting at the company level, this chapter shows that company discourse across these speculative tech ventures—including VICE and BuzzFeed—traffic in revolutionary discourse in order to “conjure” their own cultural and economic capital.¹⁴³ Separating VICE’s journalism from its broader industrial positioning misses the broader story of this “messy middle” as a digital video or “post-network” content industry came of age between 2005 and 2018 alongside the crystallization of the creative economy. It also troubles clean narratives that place sole blame on platforms or wild mismanagement for these media companies’ implosions by thinking more broadly about the contexts to which many journalistic industries were responding. YouTube’s “adpocalypse” and Facebook’s “pivot to video” played a large role in further destabilizing parts of the journalism and creative sectors; yet these companies’ early moves to privilege video were built on a deeper history of chasing a monopoly over digital ad revenues, which sites like VICE and BuzzFeed—as well as reaching entertainment conglomerates—participated in creating. There were also deeper structural issues within these companies due to their embrace of entrepreneurial, informal workplace cultures that created the conditions for both incredible storytelling and journalism, as well as toxic, exploitative, and deeply harmful power dynamics built on racism and misogyny (a broader throughline across technology-driven companies).

¹⁴³ Anna Tsing argues that when capital turns to the financial and speculative value production schemata of the creative economy, companies, places, and people engage in acts of imaginative value enunciation in order to “conjure” their value as part of a broader process of “spectacular accumulation.” She writes that, “[i]n speculative enterprises, profit must be imagined before it can be extracted; the possibility of economic performance must be conjured like a spirit to draw an audience of potential investors. The more spectacular the conjuring, the more possible an investment frenzy.” Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005): 57.

Digital distribution allowed new voices to enter and critique the entrenched politics of a commercializing news economy, which gave rise to the phenomenon of “social news,” wherein companies experimented with news norms to deliver more “authentic” news that could be both informative and entertaining, groundbreaking and profitable. Edward Hurcombe’s study of social news provides important historical and definitional context for the rise of “born-digital news creators,” which he finds developed in response to the rise of social media networks.¹⁴⁴ Drawing upon critical studies of digital culture and journalism, Hurcombe argues that social news as a genre and institution blends millennial-targeted news with social media logics, emphasizing engagement, sociability, and personalization line with social media platforms’ emphasis on metrics-driven performance indicators, a sharing ecosystem, and ability to center individual “you”ers.¹⁴⁵ While outlets like BuzzFeed and Mic (his two U.S. case studies) have been derided by the “old guard” of journalism as click-bait driven, Hurcombe sees these outlets as operating within an emergent desire for new news goalposts and formats that speak to the desires of an online culture.

This work on social news is formative in the ways that it names an emergent institution and moves away from easy assumptions about the value of “new media” news ventures. Yet, the research presented in this chapter suggests that Hurcombe makes three major assumptions that speak to larger blindspots within siloed studies of social news or digital news start-ups. The first assumption is that outlets like BuzzFeed were “made for and in response to” social media platforms. Insider histories of BuzzFeed show that the company in fact had roots in the blog era and built a sizable following on its owned and operated site long before pivoting to embrace the reach of social media platforms like Facebook in their

¹⁴⁴ Hurcombe, *Social News*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

pursuit of audience aggregation via producing viral content. Similarly, VICE launched as a web venture partially funded by in-house advertising services and licensing deals with the “old guard” bastions themselves—namely, CNN and Viacom in the early days. The second assumption is that journalism represented the central product these companies offered. While their journalistic efforts were on the rise throughout the early-2010s, BuzzFeed and VICE strategically positioned themselves on the fringes of journalism until the mid-2010s, often to sidestep responsibility for any damage caused along the way of their disruptive pursuits.

In other words, my research shows that news was one product among many other ventures as these tech-media companies searched for monetizable online communities. This chapter illuminates the ways that platforms and “social news” companies together created an investment bubble around digital news, specifically video news. Their tandem moves to act quickly without consideration of the potential externalities fed the speculative rise of each company’s journalism products and informed their competitive business moves inside the arena of journalistic production. Seeking to scale like tech companies and buoyed by increasingly large investments from venture capital and media conglomerates alike, outlets like BuzzFeed and VICE were forced into making quick moves to evade scrutiny of their hold over millennial audiences online. Enthralled by the possibilities of a globally connected social web, young tech-oriented CEOs made big bets on social media platforms’ interests in growing a sustainable digital journalism ecology built for their platforms. This history shows the ways that—building on key arguments by Philip Napoli and Robyn Caplan—tech companies like YouTube and Facebook have been operating in the media space despite skirting categorization as media companies.¹⁴⁶ While Napoli and Caplan cite Facebook’s

¹⁴⁶ Napoli and Caplan, “Why Media Companies Insist.”

launch of the Facebook Journalism Project as “the first step towards genuine vertical integration in the news arena,” my research demonstrates that this history stretches further back to YouTube’s tactical challenges to television and Facebook’s competitive response in the early to mid-2010’s. In the middle were media companies like VICE, whose variable industry positionality responded to the shifting power dynamics between the old players of the media industries and social media platforms, as well as demonstrated a (purportedly) successful model for digital-first news. Utilizing “tech company” discourse to skirt regulatory and other modes of responsibility—particularly towards news content—has paved the way for the crisis in news and informational content we see today.¹⁴⁷

The last assumption is one that pairs well with broader conversations on the broader content industry. A romanticism about the possibilities for media democratization—born out of real critiques of “the corporate media” system that emerged due to deregulation—has led to the idea that online metrics “speak” for the social. As businesses built on creating viral content, media companies like BuzzFeed and VICE utilized virality to sell their brand influence to anyone who wanted to reach young users online. These metrics became important, but in reality, they were opaque at best. While Hurcombe redefines virality as “sociability” in order to stress the ways that “social news” companies facilitate social distribution, I argue that virality and social media metrics cannot act as a stand-in for the popular or the social precisely because these metrics are always already mediated by the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. Napoli and Caplan see this is a strategic move, noting that what is largely absent from the “not-a-media-company discourse “is the important (if sometimes blurred distinction between *entertainment* and *news* media.” They find this intentional: “From a regulation and policy standpoint, the production, distribution, and consumption of news has been a far greater point of motivation and focus for policy-makers.”

platforms that have an interest in promoting monetizable content to users, not in merely surfacing what is popular (see next chapter for more).¹⁴⁸

This debate over the meaningfulness of social media metrics and other big digital data, such as those developed in-house by companies like VICE, Vox, and BuzzFeed, is an important one that falls by the wayside. This chapter reveals the ways that digital metrics—particularly around viral videos—were always already contested by different ways of measuring (and monetizing) audiences. Television studies and critical information studies have long demonstrated the ways that data is never “raw” or without its own politics;¹⁴⁹ similarly, TV industry scholars and industry commentators questioned from the beginning the meaningfulness of “viral videos” as a stand-in for audience metrics or, culturally, the popular. Facebook’s infamous “pivot to video” showed the ways that data could be manipulated and misrepresented, particularly in a closely held and unregulated world of platform metrics, which further inflated a bubble around news video production that, realistically, may not have existed. These shaky foundations drove many other news organizations to invest in social media distribution, which further tied their business models to the mercurial and opaque decisions of Google and Facebook. While Facebook claims that this gross miscalculation was an error, one can also read it as a strategic way of boosting numbers to draw online video advertising budgets to Facebook and away from competitor

¹⁴⁸ Hurcombe states: “My use of “sociability” is a way of reframing similar concepts such as “virality” (and even more reductive labels like “clickbait”) by placing emphasis on the interplay between users and texts. This contrasts with these other terms since they largely stress the ways in which texts (and platforms) make people “do” things.” I find this distinction is problematic in the way that it obscures the mediating function of metrics and algorithms. Hurcombe, *Social News*, 7.

¹⁴⁹ There’s a long history of contending with the ways that data always need to be “cooked,” such as Lisa Gitelman’s collection, Lisa Gitelman, ed., *“Raw Data” Is an Oxymoron* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013). See also the ways that audience data has always been a site of “selling audiences” to advertisers in Eileen Meehan’s canonical work on television and broadcasting data: Eileen R. Meehan, “A History of the Commodity Audience,” in *A Companion to the History of American Broadcasting* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2018), 347–69.

YouTube. These criticisms abound across this critical crisis historiography: from the early YouTube channels and viral videos to BuzzFeed’s infamous watermelon Facebook livestream, the question of meaningful audience data has pointed to a need to excavate and examine audience metrics from underneath the “black-boxed” proprietary algorithmic structures of Facebook and Google/YouTube to create more sustainable structures for news and cultural content writ large.

The platformization of news has forced a turn to paywalls and subscriptions—or, for independent writers and/or newcomers—more dependence on social media platforms in an age where advertisers increasingly avoid being scheduled against news. Excessive spending on outlets like VICE placed journalistic bets on this new guard while local newspapers were routinely closed, and funding was diverted away from reporting and toward content creation. Despite their irreverent beginning in sex, drugs, and edgy youth culture (VICE) or listicles and cat memes (BuzzFeed), digital media start-ups lead the industry toward dependencies on digital distribution, drove a rise in metrics-driven journalism, and formalized a market for boundary-pushing journalism that goes viral. These companies participated in tying virality/popularity metrics to quality, despite deep archives of journalism research demonstrating the danger of commercial incentives for producing buzzworthy stories without a safety net of publicly funded alternatives. BuzzFeed and VICE, while simultaneously acting as a launchpad for innovative media and news, pushed the industry toward the instability it sees today.

Chapter Three

The VICE Guide to Going Viral: VICE, ISIS, and the Politics of Viscerality

On August 7, 2014, VICE Media released a five-part documentary series titled “The Islamic State” on YouTube. Preceding the beheading of U.S. freelance journalist James Foley by just twelve days, the 43-minute video featured an array of equally fearsome footage captured by freelance reporter, Medyan Dairieh, as he embedded with Islamic State (ISIS) militants travelling through occupied territories in Iraq and Syria over the course of three weeks. By August 22, the video had already amassed over seven million views on YouTube and currently has nearly 15 million, making VICE Media a surprising viral success amongst journalism communities despite previous qualms about the young media brand’s brazen approach to digital news and documentary. Despite some initial debate over the legality and potential journalistic ramifications of VICE’s participation in and dissemination of what appears to be a rather controlled tour through IS territory, VICE’s “The Islamic State” took home a Peabody Award in April 2015.¹ The commentary praised VICE’s immersive coverage, thanking VICE for “taking us inside ISIS and showing us its chilling absurdity and its hideous strength.”²

That same summer, ISIS also released several videos that shocked journalistic and social media communities alike. From 2014 to 2016, ISIS media proliferated, with the group’s in-house media operation, al-Furqan, producing nearly 9,000 pieces of visual content, 10% of which involved high-definition and highly stylized videos that were

¹ Andrew F. March, “Is Vice’s Documentary on ISIS Illegal?,” *The Atlantic*, October 1, 2014.

² “The Islamic State (VICE News),” *Peabody Awards*, 2015, <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/the-islamic-state>.

uploaded and circulated across multiple social media platforms and websites such as reddit and 4chan.³ What rose to the surface of this deluge of ISIS content, at least in Western nations, was ISIS's penchant for violent videos that glorified and aestheticized gruesome scenes of death and violence to instill terror globally. Before the video of ISIS's beheading of U.S. journalist James Foley went viral, ISIS released an equally horrific viral video: "The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV" circulated across a variety of digital platforms in late May 2014 and began surfacing on YouTube and in journalistic coverage starting in early June. Featuring a fast-paced series of horrific scenes of indiscriminate murder, IED explosions, and sniper footage, the video was discussed both for its level of brutality as well as its high production value. Journalists in particular compared screen grabs from the video side-by-side with stills from Hollywood productions such as Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). ISIS's media production and social media skills were lauded throughout popular press coverage as "surprisingly brilliant," yet also "terrifying" and "horrifying propaganda."⁴

Although never placed in conversation outright by popular or journalistic discourse, both "The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV" and "The Islamic State" reverberated from digital networks into public conversations about the level of threat posed by ISIS. When examined side-by-side, they also draw from a similar set of iconographies, aesthetic choices, narrative logics, and subject positionalities. This extends to even the choice of scenes; much of the b-roll footage for "The Islamic State" seemingly sources al-Furqan videos and even features scenes taken directly from "The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV," as I detail below.

³ Daniel Milton, "Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, October 2016: 22.

⁴ Patrick Kingsley, "Who Is behind ISIS's Terrifying Online Propaganda Operation?," *The Guardian*, June 23, 2014.

An emergent media economy around intensity and engagement is at the heart of what facilitated this encounter between VICE Media and ISIS. At a broader level, each group's immersive approach to video content was central to solidifying a brand image and mobilizing affect around their proposed visions of the world. The centrality of affect to the circulation of both IS' and VICE's branded content raises critical questions about the broader symbolic and affective economies that shape the contours of digital culture. This chapter argues that VICE Media's "The Islamic State" and its aesthetic resonances with ISIS's "The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV" can be read as a site of the collision between two emerging media brands in their prime, each hoping to extend and expand their reach and cultural influence. These two brand-building projects converge around each organization's distinctive use of viral digital videos, particularly those designed to engage viewers viscerally through aestheticized violence. I further claim that each organization's focus on immersive storytelling and pursuit of edgy or taboo topics draw upon similar aesthetic appeals to sensorial and often non-cognitive experience, reflecting a deeper entanglement between circulating affective content, platform monetization, and the distributions of value within digital culture. In other words, the underlying architectures of virality determined by platforms informs the resonances between both organizations' brand strategies and their most viral content—architectures that continuously surface videos that engage viewers at the "gut," a modality of affect that has been defined as *viscerality*. Producing visceral videos was central for building brand visibility, legitimacy, and relevance for both brands, and this raises questions about the underlying values of virality within and across networked communities, as well as the role affect plays in virality and distributions of value within digital culture.

Studies of ISIS's unique attention to media – social media in particular – have unearthed the ways that ISIS media production adopted viral branding practices more typically seen within the types of affective brand campaigns that take shape within what Sarah Banet-Weiser has called “brand culture.”⁵ These studies suggest that it was ISIS's particular attention to the affective circulations of digital culture that intentionally propelled ISIS propaganda into public discourse. As I will discuss below, many of ISIS's viral brand strategies parallel strategic moves engaged by VICE Media in building their own media empire—one built on pushing boundaries of taste and comfortability of on-screen coverage produced by a purportedly alienating “mainstream culture.” To understand the aesthetic and tactical resonances between these two media brands, I analyze two of ISIS's and VICE Media's viral videos (“The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV” and “The Islamic State,” respectively) and the surrounding discourse describing each video's virality. I contextualize this analysis using supplementary material on each brand's relationship to virality and viral branding tactics to identify trends in the types of aesthetics, affects, and discursive positioning that contributed to each brand's viral visibility. In studying the resonances between these two videos and their location within networks of visceral video content, I do not collapse the stark differences between these two media brands; it is important to note that the impacts of ISIS's aestheticized violence are much more dire than VICE Media's remediation of their gruesome productions. Yet, the broader implications of VICE Media's ability to garner brand visibility and accreditation through the circulation of such similar

⁵ Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015); Sarah Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Craig Whiteside, “Lighting the Path: The Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016,” *International Center for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 11 (2016): 1–36; Charlie Winter, “Apocalypse, Later: A Longitudinal Study of the Islamic State Brand,” *Critical Studies in Communication* 35, no. 1 (2018): 103–21.

visceral forms reveals a central problem of investing in viral, affective news as a model for saving a struggling news industry. In drawing these comparisons, I question the vitality of viral, affective news (at least as developed by a for-profit media company like VICE), particularly the way that virality has silenced criticism of VICE's sensational or stunt reporting because of the affective value it purportedly connotes.⁶

This chapter extends the rise of viral news detailed in the previous chapter by turning to critical theories that critique digital platform power, finding that commercial platforms' viral architectures and economies are stoking an increasingly divisive political terrain. As I unpack further in chapter four, viral videos travel globally; both creating the means of identifying a digital popular culture and stoking the rise of affective politics and sensational media. In this chapter, instead of placing VICE Media's news content within a history of journalistic institutions and creeping forms of commodification that shape the dynamics of news genres, I instead offer that VICE Media's forays into acts of digital journalism are a product of and reflect shifting dynamics within digital content networks as social media platforms have centralized their distributary power, specifically in the realm of digital video. In doing so, I connect VICE's viral mediations to a larger body of scholarship examining the relationships between affect, algorithms, and the forms of content that emerge and accrue value across the networked publics that shape the topographies of digital culture.⁷

⁶ As an aside, one of VICE's former employees even went as far to say that most VICE coverage pandered to standard authorities, stating that "nobody loves VICE more than cops." Similar immersive coverage of gang violence in Chicago displayed similar tactics as VICE's Islamic State video—Thomas Morten rides along with cops patrolling and assessing gang violence, in a manner reminiscent of racist television copaganda. The former employee also claimed that VICE management seriously considered a request from NYPD to rebrand their image using VICE audiences. See: Reeves Wiedeman, "A Company Built on a Bluff" (New York, June 10, 2018).

⁷ Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davies, eds., *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Tony D. Sampson, *A Sleepwalker's Guide to Social Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

I use this bounded case study of two twinned viral videos as a modality for assessing the impact of the opaque digital infrastructures of influence and contagion, as well as an extension on circulating research on digital war and conflict, particularly as critical scholarship has grappled with the odd ascendancy of ISIS media within digital cultures.

Viral Architectures: Affective Mediation in Digital Video Economies

In a deep-dive on VICE Media's atypical form of journalism for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Chris Ip writes that "VICE's brand of video-making is built on a style the company calls 'immersionism'—an ostensibly raw aesthetic that resonates with world-weary audiences distrustful of shiny, formulaic programming. So far, it seems that everything to which VICE applies its formula becomes unpretentious."⁸ While immersive tactics within journalistic or documentary audiovisual production have a longer history,⁹ Ip's argument here reveals a few convergences between often separate trajectories of non-fiction media, such as news media and documentary. VICE's claim to news originality involves adopting an amateur form of video-making that in fact reimagines and decenters tropes of journalism, like objectivity, critical distance, and static forms of audience address. Within documentary traditions, VICE's videos hardly experiment with form or truth, instead opting for the coherence of a recognizable "VICE brand" of stylistic approach that becomes rather uniform regardless of directorial vision.

⁸ Chris Ip, "The Cult of Vice," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 2015.

⁹ See: Esther Zimanyi and Emma Ben Ayoun, "Introduction: Humanitarian Immersions," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 61, no. 3 (Spring 2022): 154-159; Lisa Nakamura, "Feeling Good about Feeling Bad: Virtuous Virtual Reality and the Automation of Racial Empathy," *Journal of Visual Culture* 19, no. 1 (April 1, 2020): 47-64.

While VICE's oeuvre of videos still includes many conventions of non-fiction media more broadly, such as the use of interviews, voiceover narration, and an on-screen host who anchors and guide viewers, they are marked as more authentic and "real" precisely because of their ability to connect young viewers to global events or cultures in a more informal and "immersive" fashion. Following the release of many controversial, yet ultimately deemed innovative, video stunts that range from following Dennis Rodman through North Korea to interviewing child suicide bombers in Afghanistan, popular discourse surrounding VICE suggested that VICE's approach to digital video-making represented a "changing of the guard" within legacy media institutions through their ability to engage viewers by further blurring the lines between news, documentary, travelogue, and entertainment production in an "authentic" manner.¹⁰

Ip's analysis finds that VICE's seemingly "raw" and unfiltered honesty defines VICE's multimedia brand, stating that "VICE's attraction for its valuable millennial audience is predicated on the notion that it is real and raw, not plastic and prepackaged like the rest of the mainstream media world."¹¹ This suggests a broader collapse of genres—and the institutions that define them—across non-fiction media caused by the emergence of new digital storytelling modalities linked to proliferating digital technologies and a broader economy for video production online. While VICE's (and others') development of news divisions as brand-building products can be placed into a longer history of journalism's cannibalization by entertainment industries, it also reveals the ways that affective storytelling

¹⁰ See "Basketball Diplomacy" and "Killer Kids," Season 1, *Vice on HBO*. For more on VICE's industrial positioning within journalism and media during 2014, see Jeff Bercovici, "Vice News Launches, Promising 'Changing of the Guard in Media,'" *Forbes*, 4 March 2014 and David Carr, "Its Edge Intact, Vice is Chasing Hard News," *New York Times*, 25 August 2014.

¹¹ Ip, "The Cult of Vice."

about global news and culture content is a lucrative business for digital media brands. As discussed in the previous chapter, the era of citizen journalism and blogging gave way to a proliferation of user-made media and the rise of platforms where people could increasingly contest mainstream networks of media power by recording, livestreaming, uploading, or sharing their own views, perspectives, and acts of creativity. Within journalism and news production, major outlets invited feedback and “citizen reporting,” particularly in areas where they may not have had the budgets to send full-time staffers.¹² Meanwhile, forms of political organizing took to platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to convey vital messages without having to route through institutional channels like network television coverage. Reporters, television news broadcasts, and documentarians alike increasingly incorporated amateur footage to both fill a material need for coverage despite dwindling budgets, as well as convey a sense of “raw” and “real” unmediated access to events occurring in real time. In a world filled with information, entertainment, and content overload, VICE’s series of news and conflict coverage (that I argue blurs lines between commercial documentary and investigative reporting) purported to be “the definitive guide to an uncertain world” by taking viewers into the headline stories impacting global politics and culture. What surfaces as VICE’s self- and industry-proclaimed value for journalistic content today is that VICE videos convey the *feeling* of global events and appeal to the affective capacities of viewers, doubling down on affects or atmospheres that are notably intensive.

Recent scholarship spanning a variety of disciplines invested in researching the political realities of contemporary digital culture have turned to affect to describe the intensity-driven modes of expression and connection found online. Affect, or “the name we

¹² See Lindsay Palmer, “‘iReporting’ an Uprising: CNN and Citizen Journalism in Network Culture,” *Television & New Media* 14, no. 5 (September 2013): 367-385.

give to those forces-visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing... that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension” as defined by Gregory Siegworth and Melissa Gregg, is most often described as a pre-cognitive sensation of perceived intensity produced by and with the body’s sensing capacities.¹³ Affect re-routes assumptions that privilege cognition over emotion by inverting the Cartesian divisions of mind and body, drawing attention to the ways that thought and emotion follow or are always in co-occurrence with our embodied modes of sensation and perception. The space of affect has increasingly become a horizon for biotechnical data capture, where our bodily reactions to specific stimuli are treated as more reliable windows into our thoughts, feelings, and emotions than our cognitive perceptions.¹⁴

Zizi Papacharissi’s work is particularly illuminating for understanding how affective relationships to global events shape and are shaped by the publics that emerge via digital platforms. In *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, she utilizes extensive analyses of Twitter data to theorize and locate the role of affect in the circulations, expressions, and forms of interaction that take place on digital platforms.¹⁵ Through this study, Papacharissi tampers the often abstract layers of affect theory in order to unpack the ways that affect drives emergent digital modes of journalism, civic participation, and storytelling, particularly in regards to massive social events like global uprisings and rebellions. In fact, Papacharissi argues that affect plays an increasingly vital role in the ways

¹³ Gregory Siegworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregory Siegworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 1.

¹⁴ See: Patricia Clough, *The User Unconscious: On Affect, Media, and Measure* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Kate and Vladen Joler Crawford, “Anatomy of an AI System,” 2018, <http://www.anatomyof.ai>.

¹⁵ Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

that digital culture functions, stating that “[a]ffect, as the sum of—often discordant—feelings about affairs, public and private, is examined as the energy that drives, neutralizes, or entraps networked publics.”¹⁶ As recent findings continue to show how platforms’ monetization and advertising models, such as those of Facebook and YouTube, reward affective content regardless of veracity or potential level of harm, Papacharissi’s assertion that affect is at the root of the way platforms shape our digital worlds becomes even more vital for scholarship invested in digital culture and politics.¹⁷

Affect is a significant departure from broader conversations circulating in journalism studies that examine shifting relationships to central journalistic concepts like objectivity and its relationship to the “emotional side” of reporting.¹⁸ It brings more theoretical concerns about the relationships between digital technologies, biopower, and the economies involved in bio-technical assemblages to bear on the grounded, empirical work that tracks changes in media trends, particularly around journalistic content. Academic and popular discourses that grapple with the benefits and dangers of global connectivity through digital platforms often focus in on the avenues for participation (and potentially revolution) that such platforms afford users or track small changes in established media institutions due to incorporation of amateur labor or content. While Papacharissi certainly attends to some of the utopic dimensions of large-scale events like digital revolutions, she also flags some of the potential dangers of a primarily affective public and mode of politics. She cautions that “the internet pluralizes but does not inherently democratize spheres of social, cultural, political, or

¹⁶ Ibid, 7.

¹⁷ For example, see Zeynep Tufekci, “YouTube, the Great Radicalizer,” *New York Times*, 10 March 2018 and the broader coverage of the 2016 U.S. election and subsequent Cambridge Analytica scandal.

¹⁸ See Chris Peters, “Emotion Aside or Emotional Side?: Crafting an ‘Experience of Involvement’ in the News,” *Journalism* 12.3 (2011): 297-316 and Henrik Bodker, “Vice Media Inc: Youth, Lifestyle – and News,” *Journalism* 18.1 (2017): 27-43.

economic activity.”¹⁹ While seemingly democratic, digital platforms incentivize and give discursive weight to content that obtains the most likes, shares, and comments – otherwise known as “going viral”—regardless of whether that virality is through endorsements or attacks of the viral tweet. In this argument, Papacharissi finds that a plurality of voices does not guarantee a democratic sense of power or visibility, but rather offers semblances of community that benefit platforms’ ability to turn a profit. The publics that take shape around viral tweets or trends are also temporary, providing momentary “feelings of community” that are nevertheless not actual formations of communities or enactments of a collective politics.²⁰

Most recently, social media platforms’ economic interests in data capture have resulted in experimentations with ways to prime affect and behavior to encourage more engagement with digital content, both for the purposes of increasing users’ dependence upon or investment in the platform and to collect and sell increasingly granular forms of biotechnical data to interested parties. As such, platforms like YouTube have been shown to drive users to increasingly intense, divisive, or otherwise affectively charged videos for the sake of increasing watch time, and therefore, exposure to advertising. YouTube’s attempts to build its own alternative ecosystem to television converges with the rise of a globalizing viral video culture, demonstrating the global reach of some nascent affective publics online. While social media platforms’ ability to affect and create global affective publics was originally steeped in its potential for democracy and revolution (e.g., the early 2010’s Arab Spring uprisings, often categorized as “Twitter Revolutions”), today affective publics online are studied through lenses of hate, misinformation, and conspiracy.

¹⁹ Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*, 8.

²⁰ See: Jodi Dean, “Affective Networks,” *Media Tropes eJournal* 2, no. 2 (2010): 19–44.

YouTube and viral videos were central to fomenting both VICE Media and ISIS's global media brands. ISIS's reliance on digital marketing tactics and their attention to stylistic detail in their video productions aimed at Western audiences in fact marked a departure from previous media tactics pursued by groups like the Taliban.²¹ The seemingly senseless and grotesque violence depicted in their highly stylized and meticulously crafted videos also confounds the tropes of typical genres of digital videos. According to one account, ISIS's videographic style went viral online precisely because it's formally related to already circulating genres of illicit videos, such as pornography, that consist of both high-quality "narrative" films and more gratuitous or raw scenes consistent with "gonzo" videos.²² Many of ISIS's videos notably mix elements of raw, gonzo footage with carefully directed and edited scenes of violence, leading to an increase in their popularity within digital networks already interested in violence, jihadism, or both. In fact, these videos "attracted such a large audience online that the State Department recently launched its own YouTube channel to counter their appeal, superimposing words of mocking condemnation over graphic images of ISIS's brutality, entirely missing the point that ISIS appeals to potential recruits in part *because* of its exorbitant violence."²³ Using branding tactics, ISIS's violent videos were often an entryway into a world of ISIS media content, which ran the gambit from ISIS-produced material showing the "softer" side of ISIS militants to networks of ISIS "fanboys" to apps that volunteer personal social media counts for ISIS media posting and circulation.²⁴

²¹ Whiteside, "Lighting the Path."

²² Simon Cottee, "The Pornography of Jihadism," *The Atlantic*, September 12, 2014.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Inte Gloerick et al., "The Islamic State Unfiltered," *The Institute of Network Culture*, April 22, 2016; Aris Roussinos, "Jihad Selfies: British Extremists in Syria Love Social Media" (Vice, December 12, 2013); Aris Roussinos, "Behead First, Ask Questions Later: The Disturbing Social Media of British Jihadists," *Vice*, April 15, 2014); Roussinos Aris, "Unmasking of ShamiWitness Offers Glimpse into Bizarre World of the Islamic State Twitter Fanboys," *Vice*, December 12, 2014.

In fact, I argue that a comparison between ISIS as a viral media brand and VICE Media's own rise as a global media source of cutting-edge conflict coverage provides a glimpse into the underlying values of video economies and the networked publics who engage with them. Studies of ISIS's distinct focus on digital media, specifically video, aligns with a growing scholarly interest in understanding the role of persuasion, influence, and sharing economies on and across social media platforms. In contrast to studying more innocuous forms of viral culture, such as dance trends, cat videos, and dance challenges, recent studies focusing specifically on the darker sides of virality have outlined the ways that the affectively charged networks of digital culture have also served to circulate propaganda, misinformation, and build networks of "alternative influence."²⁵ This work has already had significant impacts on platforms' algorithmic forms of distributing value, with companies like Google and Facebook attempting to work more actively to moderate false, derogatory, or harmful networks of content. Yet, I argue that ISIS videos, racist pundits, dance challenges, and VICE Media's sensational reporting coexist precisely because of the ways that they engage viewers affectively, and that the ambiguity of affective mediation and its circulations of intensity for the purpose of fine-tuning emotional data capture will continue to drive virality toward increasingly divisive, euphoric, or shocking content.

As I detail below, ISIS's videos virality is not due only to the intentional weaponization of images and their ability to tactically project a particular ideological effect across networked publics, but rather they spread because Western audiences' encounter with such spectacularized scenes of violence builds and is built upon an affective regime of

²⁵ See for example, Boler and Davies, *The Affective Politics of Digital Media*; Rebecca Lewis, "Alternative Influence," *Data & Society*, September 18, 2018).

twinned “morbid” fascination and horror. In the case of ISIS’s videos, the act of sharing the video is driven primarily by affect—the need to do something with the force of encounter mediated by these intentionally arresting videos. This generates an affective economy around images and videos of ISIS’s brutality and visceral aesthetics, which is further stoked by platforms like YouTube’s underlying algorithmic investment in surfacing the most “engaging” content. As opposed to earlier “terrorist” media that circulated videos aimed at explaining the religious, ideological, or historical reasons for their acts of brutality, ISIS traffics in visceral images without these contextual frames. Instead, ISIS trafficked in the excessive, spectacular, and decontextualized sensational content that circulates in the broader attention economy, utilizing typical clout-chasing tactics like hashtagging ISIS videos with trending topics to appear in search results and recruiting loyal fans to combat content removal by continuing to repost videos.²⁶ Hitching its coverage to trending topics on social media, VICE Media’s “The Islamic State” parasitically tapped into circulating desires and morbid curiosities for viewing ISIS’s brutality in a similarly tactical attempt to boost its own virality and influence.

In some ways, VICE and ISIS’s viral convergence offers a preemptive glimpse into how virality can build legitimacy through its reverberations outwards into offline worlds and other media. Both VICE’s and ISIS’s viral videos focused on each video’s capacity to shock, chill, or enrage Western audiences. While the discourse responding to VICE’s release of “The Islamic State” focused on its capacity to provide insider views of ISIS’s “chilling absurdity and hideous strength,” journalists responding to “The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV” repeatedly referenced the video’s cinematic qualities, comparing its mix of stylized

²⁶ “Hashtag Terror: How ISIS Manipulates Social Media,” *Anti-Defamation League*, July 11, 2014.

camera work and eye for aesthetics to Hollywood films.²⁷ Both videos were propelled into these public forums through their instantaneous virality on YouTube, stirring widespread discussion of their impacts on Western viewers. Specifically, both videos circulated within and across both social media and legacy media networks because of the intensity of reactions they garnered in their circulations across online networks. At the heart of these discussions both off- and online was each media brand's provocative videographic approach, in which scenes of death or violence were spectacularized by detailed attention to powerful or striking imagery, cinematic aesthetics, and narrative or cinematographic choices that immersed viewers within scenes of spectacular violence.

These cinematic displays of stylized violence and their distinctly affective nature are also tied to significant branded projects built on "world-building" or "empire-building." ISIS utilized digital networks to both create and document its vision for a new Caliphate, which launched several inquiries into ISIS's uniquely digital approach to insurgency. The group's effective use of social media networks to recruit, document, and visibilize ISIS as a formidable global threat has had broader impacts on contemporary understandings of war, media, and insurgency. Since 2014, a variety of critical media and communication scholarship has worked to parse the communicative logics, aesthetics, and forms of weaponization embedded within ISIS's viral imagery in order to better understand the reasons for their powerful virality and relationship to shifting relationships between digital media, war, and propaganda. Grappling with ISIS videos' impacts on dispersed networks of viewers, these studies have brought attention to the emotional, moral, and aesthetic functionings of ISIS's media, locating their particular power in typologies of horrorism and

²⁷ "The Islamic State"; March, "Is Vice's Documentary on ISIS Illegal?"; Carr, "Its Edge Intact."

death spectacles, use of branding techniques, and weaponization of the channels of a globally networked affect brought about by a digitally connected media ecology.²⁸

What is significant about this body of research on ISIS media is that it centers affect and the spectator's embodied relationship to specifically aestheticized scenes of violence, particularly the ways that Western visceral reactions to ISIS's cinematic approach to scenes of death and overt violence propelled the virality of its videos and their remediation within US and global media networks. Despite this scholarship's attention to the visual and visceral elements of ISIS's viral videos, the focus remains, as Simon Cottee and Jack Cunliffe argue, on the encoding of political messaging as a form of image weaponization, with little attention paid to the ways that audiences respond to these messages.²⁹ Through their survey of predominantly young adults in the UK and North America, Cottee and Cunliffe find that, rather than instill fear and terror by manipulating social media networks, many viewers responded to ISIS's videos with "a morbid buzz... and that for all the disgust, discomfort, and fear they evoke, something makes us—or many of us, at least—want to look at them."³⁰ They also identified a troubling result, in which survey respondents found a "seeming palatability" in ISIS's broader slate of nonviolent productions as a jihadi lifestyle brand produced, in which "the themes of community and righteousness they trade on [were]

²⁸ Lilie Chouliaraki and Angelos Kissas, "The Communication of Horrorism: A Typology of ISIS Online Death Videos," *Critical Studies in Communication* 35, no. 1 (2018): 24–39; Marwan Kraidy, "The Projectilic Image: Islamic State's Digital Visual Warfare and Global Networked Affect," *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 8 (2017): 1194–1209; Marwan Kraidy, "Fun Against Fear in the Caliphate: Islamic State's Spectacle and Counter Spectacle," *Critical Studies in Communication* 35, no. 1 (2018): 40–56; Atwan, *The Islamic State*; Whiteside, "Lighting the Path"; Winter, "Apocalypse Later."

²⁹ Simon Cottee and Jack Cunliffe, "Watching ISIS: How Young Adults Engage with Official English-Language ISIS Videos," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43, no. 3 (2020): 183–207.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

received positively among a not insignificant number of those who profess no sympathy for the group.”³¹

Cottee and Cunliffe’s findings demonstrate the complexities of studying the relationships between forms of emotional contagion and virality. From their work, we gain insight into the reasons underlying VICE’s “The Islamic State” video’s virality: an interest in consuming alternative visions of the world, particularly as groups represent themselves as victims of injustice or suffering. ISIS videos are steeped in alternative visions of the world that critique the detrimental and brutalistic effects of Western imperial violence—the suffering inflicted by US and UK imperialism is often cited as the justification for ISIS’s brutality. In a move that is equally as critical of US media as manufacturers of imperial propaganda, VICE’s longtime mission to cover underreported stories offers viewers a glimpse into “the world through our eyes... the world of VICE.” By positioning their coverage of global youth subcultures and divisive politics as one aligned with digital audiences’ interests, VICE’s popularity elucidates an underlying interest of the “democratized” internet—a desire to search for alternate realities or worlds that offer transformative change. Yet, Lilie Chouliaraki also questions the ways that victimization, suffering, and rights claims travel in digital environments.³² To understand the ways victim discourses proliferate online, she finds that “the commodification of our languages of recognition” are now “adapting to the business requirements of a global digital market, branding solidarity and enfolding therapeutic encounters in metrics and surveillance tools,”

³¹ Ibid.

³² She argues that vulnerability has become monetized through social media platforms, finding that the ways misogynist groups and “canceled” public figures use the internet to communicate their so-called victimization “should best be seen as a matter of the algorithmic logic of platforms that, in the pursuit of profit, maximize the visibility of any claim to vulnerability to monetize user engagement.” See: Lilie Chouliaraki, “Victimhood: The Affective Politics of Vulnerability,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (February 2021): 10–27: 20.

with digital economies and algorithmic politics acting as central mediating structures that stoke and manage “the possibilities of visibility for claims to pain and the patterns of engagement with them.”³³

Thus, instead of using frames of propaganda or misinformation, which signal an intentional misuse of communication networks to indoctrinate others into a particular ideology, I understand the ways that specific affects, such as the twinned visceral fear and morbid fascination with ISIS’s death spectacles, cohere online as *reverberatory*. According to Adi Kuntsman, reverberation challenges the unidirectional and often universal assumptions of “bad” virality by allowing us to turn our attention toward “the movements of feelings around various affective regimes and conventions, and in and out of digital domains, as well as about the multiplicity of effects such movements might entail: sometimes intensifying certain emotions, sometimes muffling them, and sometimes transforming a feeling into its opposite.”³⁴ A reverberatory approach to affective mediation, which draws on Sara Ahmed’s work on affective economies and contrasts positivist research paradigms such as sentiment analysis, works to capture “the ways affect and feelings take shape through movement between contexts, websites, forums, blogs, memes, comments, tweets, hashtags, devices and platforms.”³⁵ In this way, it challenges assumptions about the relative power of influencers to effectively weaponize content or “game” the algorithm in order to indoctrinate users through overt forms of propaganda or misinformation. Reverberation instead directs our attention to infrastructural dynamics (such as platforms’ interest in bolstering sharing

³³ Ibid., 24.

³⁴ Adi Kuntsman, “Reverberation, Affect, and Digital Politics of Responsibility,” in Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davies, eds., *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means* (New York: Routledge, 2021): 70.

³⁵ Ibid. See also: Sara Ahmed; “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (June 2004): 117–139.

economies) and offline emotions and feelings. Thinking with reverberation allows us to question why a particular aesthetic or type of video or image accrues affective investment and value online, often visibilized through the metrics-focused notion of virality.

The reverberation of ISIS's banned, blocked, and viral videos created an affective economy around images of ISIS brutality. Yet, the affective ambivalence, and even fascination with, both facets of ISIS's broader media production regime suggests a need to dig deeper into the digital cultures that cohere around videos circulating within and across digital media platforms. Across this emerging field of scholarship, affective media, or modes of mediation that circulate precisely because of their ability to stir strong feelings, emotions, and visceral responses from viewers, have become synonymous with investigations of the "bad" side of virality. Yet, attention to the affective surfaces of "innovative" forms of digital culture also are worthy of critical perspectives. Comparing two viral media brands that represent opposite ends of this spectrum—despite adopting similar approaches to video production and branding tactics—showcases the ways that affective, visceral forms of digital content have long been intertwined with the circulatory dynamics of platforms and their underlying affective architectures and economies.

VICE's and ISIS's paired viral moments also provides a glimpse into the eschatological and visceral forms of politics that have taken shape within and alongside the global adoption of capitalist social media platforms. Achille Mbembe has argued thinking and political expression aimed at the viscera and gut-level thinking have become the primary mode of articulating the political, in which political actors are no longer interested in previous rights-based frameworks, which focused on an end goal of universality, inclusion,

and repair.³⁶ Instead, Mbembe argues that what circulates amongst radical political groups today is a desire for rupture, which finds its mode of expression through a politics of viscosity that eschews rational discourse and rights-based political claims and instead “deploys motifs of the body (pain, suffering, anger, outrage, grief, fear—intensities) not only to make certain claims on the contemporary political dispensation, but also to contest/petition for a different type of community.”³⁷ These communities are built upon ties that privilege a similarity in wounds and collective lived experiences of pain, trauma, hunger, fear, which aligns visceral subjects who have been “so disabled by all kinds of power structures that he/she is rendered physically ill with rage, grief, or fear, none of which seems to have an outlet.”³⁸ These fixations on visceral alignments in turn produce a new set of affects and articulations of the political: affectively, it encourages a twinned fixation on self-love and collective injury, pain, rage, and suffering in the face of the debilitating structures of hypercapitalism, racism, and growing insecurity. Mbembe suggests that “our contemporary psycho-landscape of wounded lives—recycled in a general economy of neoliberalism that trades precisely on these tropes,” creates the visual and affective economies of our times.³⁹ In response to these structures, political articulations no longer have any investment in political participation, but rather demand a new future now, often through the explicit endorsement of violence against those who are seen as the source of one’s pain, suffering, and rage.

As Mbembe signals above, these new paradigms of the political run synergistically (and also antagonistically) with the interests of a neoliberal economy of visibility that

³⁶ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

³⁷ Achille Mbembe, “Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Viscerality,” YouTube, Duke Franklin Humanities Institute, 2016.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

panders to desires to vicariously experience the embodied feelings of wounded lives, violence, and suffering as a mode of self-fashioning.⁴⁰ It also responds to the viscerally embodied precarity that many face during a new crisis—in which the shallow ties between liberal democracy and capitalism have come undone:

At its core, liberal democracy is not compatible with the inner logic of global finance capitalism. The clash between these two ideas and principles is likely to be the most significant event of the first half of a twenty-first-century political landscape, itself shaped less and less by the rule of reason and more and more by the general release of passions, emotions, and affect. As a consequence of this logic of escalation, a number of institutions, ways of life, and organizational forms that previously served to contain the free market are being hollowed out, remodeled, and broken up in order to make possible what Schumpeter optimistically called ‘creative destruction’ but which today must be more appropriately qualified as destruction without reserve.⁴¹

Mbembe sees the capitalist interest of digital media platforms as tied into this push-pull dynamic of both encouraging expression and shaping desires, interests, and “colonizing psyches” toward commodities and consumption as political praxis. Ultimately, he resolves that this new form of politics—a politics of viscosity that exceeds previous attempts to incorporate capitalism’s outsides in, such as the politics of visibility and its subsequent

⁴⁰ The longer history of this across news aesthetics and narratives has been thoroughly unpacked by Lilie Chouliaraki’s notion of the “aestheticization of suffering.” She argues that news image analysis draws upon deeper narrative and semiotic codes that affirm Western views of the world affectively and symbolically. The experience of distant suffering is mediated through television news draws on deeper visual histories by either aligning scenes of suffering with calls to action or “orienting us towards vulnerable others beyond the West, cosmopolitan publics.” Lilie Chouliaraki, “The Aestheticization of Suffering on Television,” *Visual Communication* 5, no. 3 (2006): 261–85.

⁴¹ Mbembe, “Frantz Fanon.”

mutation into an economy of visibility—is one that will “revert to brutal survivalism in an ultracompetitive environment.”⁴² Mbembe’s work is focused on the return to political violence and refusal in South Africa that, since 2016, has become the norm across several national and regional contexts, and the visceral politics he outlines have taken shape in a variety of spaces spurred on by the global force of digital affect and virality.⁴³ Yet, the reverberations of visceral politics intersect circulating conversations about the digital’s role in amplifying affective politics. For example, Lilie Chouliaraki has argued that today’s political atmosphere is steeped in the broader “platformization of pain,” in which the decontextualized spaces of digital media platforms along with “platforms’ orientation towards virality... tends to amplify already popular claims to suffering without asking questions about who makes them or in which contexts of violence or vulnerability they appear.”⁴⁴ In this way, to perform politics digitally is to traffic in visceral politics and performances of pain and victimization, which are then adjudicated (or, quite literally quantified) via a platform’s measure of “user engagement” and virality.

In what follows, I bring together these strands focused on affect, digital economies, and visceral politics that reverberate outward on a global scale by examining the resonances between VICE’s “Islamic State” and ISIS’s “The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV.” Parsing their world visions, aesthetics, and circulations allows us to pause the 24/7 feeds of digital culture to consider how images cohere around circulating affective economies. In doing so, I argue that we must consider the politics of viscosity and the formation of visceral subjects

⁴² Sarah Banet-Weiser, “‘Confidence You Can Carry!’: Girls in Crisis and the Market for Girls’ Empowerment Organizations,” *Continuum* 25, no. 2 (2015): 182–93; Mbembe, “Frantz Fanon.”

⁴³ See for example, Purnima Mankekar and Hannah Carlan, “The Remediation of Nationalism: Viscerality, Virality, and Digital Affect,” in *Global Digital Cultures: Perspectives from South Asia*, ed. Aswin Punathambekar and Sriram Mohan (University of Michigan Press, 2019).

⁴⁴ Lilie Chouliaraki, “Victimhood: The Affective Politics of Vulnerability,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (February 2021): 10–27.

alongside the interests of digital platforms, which cater toward producing and reproducing affective intensities.

VICE Media, ISIS Media

Both ISIS's and VICE Media's appeal to the affective capacities, or gut level responses, of social media users fits into a broader scholarly interest in the affective politics of digital media in fields as diverse as feminist theory, journalism studies, communication and media studies, political theory, and information studies. As opaque modes of algorithmic amplification, curation, and circulation increasingly mediate the valorization of images, videos, and ideas on and offline, it is vital that media studies scholarship contend with the aesthetic registers and forms of affective intensity that manifest online with an eye toward the broader economization of affective capacities endemic to platform economies. VICE Media and ISIS's dependencies on viral, intense videos as part of their projects to conjure broader branded world visions signal the centrality of affect—and its quantification and monetization via virality—to political projects and digital ecologies alike. Using immersive, aestheticized experiences of violence or spectacles of death acted as a significant part of each media brand's broader viral video production strategy—a strategy that was meant to break through the noisy and continuous feeds and flows of digital circulations through combining high-production values with increasingly shocking and striking imagery, packaged in a narrative approach that encourages immersion into scenes of violence and minimizes ideological address.

While it remains difficult to peer into the black boxes of platforms' algorithms to parse their differential circulations of content, tracing ISIS's and VICE Media's simultaneous

rise as viral media brands in 2014 can be used as a form of speculative evidence to assess the ways that contagious affective moods or atmospheres cohere around specific affective economies. For example, the virality of VICE's "Islamic State" video intersected with YouTube's explicit interests in increasing user watch time and the prestige of YouTube videos in order to attract more advertising revenue and power.⁴⁵ Similar to YouTube's ambivalent challenge to television, VICE Media pitched its brand of news and storytelling as opposed to the boring and ideological encoding of mainstream news. Despite drawing on heavily criticized tactics of embedded reporting, VICE's journalistic approach was aimed at the interests and tastes of millennial audiences, who remained skeptical of the "objective" reportage on mainstream networks. By appealing to young, digitally oriented viewers, VICE leaned on amateur DIY aesthetics to signal their authenticity, matching the "guerrilla" or "gonzo" tactics of early web TV content with their own "immersive" reporting that subjectively reacts to and narrates the story in real time as a way to locate more authentic embodied or experiential truths.⁴⁶ Despite attracting some commentary from mainstream news outlets, VICE Media's brand of storytelling was more geared toward the market of viral videos where genres like prank or stunt videos appeared in the same space as vlogs and unsanctioned footage from soldiers stationed in Iraq. After its initial YouTube launch in 2006, VICE Media was routinely courted by YouTube as a brand that might entice advertisers to the platform from television. A Google-authored case study even spotlighted VICE's video strategy as one uniquely conducive to increasing watch times on the platform. Citing VICE's "breakout videos" ("long-form, gritty documentaries" with titles including *Suicide Forest in Japan* and *The World's Scariest Drug*), the internal report details the

⁴⁵ This is the crux of the historical context of video economies laid out in the previous chapter.

⁴⁶ Robert Levine, "A Guerrilla Video Site Meets MTV," *The New York Times*, November 19, 2007.

“science” of VICE’s viral successes—namely, releasing timely videos on trending topics that users may be Googling, using striking thumbnail imagery, and crafting divisive, sensational, or shocking titles to advertise the video.⁴⁷ The paper ultimately forwards VICE’s viral successes as a model for increasing a video or channel’s average watch-times, number of subscriptions, and overall impact on the platform.⁴⁸

In 2014, YouTube doubled down on its promotion of the channel with a targeted advertising campaign across digital and physical space in an effort to convince more skeptical brands that their ads would run alongside high-quality content.⁴⁹ As billboards were being erected to advertise VICE’s promise to “see the world differently,” ISIS’s own brand began to gain visibility via a series of shocking videos. ISIS, too, made promises to envision a different world, albeit one targeted toward the recruitment of young, disaffected people who might be easily drawn to extremism. In 2014, ISIS’s brand image rose to the forefront of discussions surrounding insurgency and extremism. Within this year alone, ISIS released several videos, many of which became icons of ISIS’s aestheticized approach to violence and brutality, and officially declared the presence of their caliphate under the rule of appointed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. According to Charlie Winter, who has tracked the group’s development of its branding tactics, the brand’s large output of violent, professionalized media content “became an international fixation that year [2014], appearing in newspapers,

⁴⁷ This of course is standard practice now in terms of YouTube influencer strategies. “VICE’s YouTube Success: Growing Sustained Viewership Through Breakout Videos,” *Google*, 2013, http://think.storage.googleapis.com/intl/ALL_uk/docs/vice-youtube-success-sustained-viewership_case-studies.pdf.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Lizzie Widdicombe, “The Bad-Boy Brand,” *The New Yorker*, April 1, 2013; Erin Griffith, “Why YouTube is Spending Mega Ad Dollars to Promote Vice News,” *Fortune*, June 19, 2014; Bilton Ricardo, “Why Is YouTube So Into Vice News?,” *Digiday*, August 6, 2014.

on network television, and across social media.”⁵⁰ The conversations circulating online and amongst pundits and politicians about these videos denounced the group for its ultraviolence, which for Winter evidenced the ways that Western media circuits themselves fell into “traps carefully laid by [ISIS] media officials.”⁵¹ The ways that online and traditional media discourse surrounding ISIS emphasized its grotesque and horrific violence served to help grow the group’s visibility through a tactical digital branding strategy: To grow its validity, ISIS intentionally crafted a brand identity of brutality and violence because it “wanted to become an international pariah; it *wanted* non-Muslim statesmen and women to challenge it on matters of religion; it wanted headlines and airtime.”⁵²

On the surface, popular discourse on ISIS during this time circulated narratives focusing primarily on the brutality of ISIS’s brand of extremism. Yet, this only provides a sliver of ISIS’s broader media production regime, which often involved tapping into softer lifestyle trends circulating across social media platforms, using memes, cat photos, and inspirational graphics on platforms like Instagram as a broader lifestyle brand imagining a world of “jihadi cool.”⁵³ According to Gloerick et al.’s study of ISIS Instagram content, the majority of ISIS content posted or reposted on the platform stemmed from regular users, who incorporated these images into their feed in mundane ways, countering circulating claims that bots and ISIS agents were propping up ISIS’s virality. Charlie Winter also finds that ISIS’s success online was through its efforts to function as a compelling media brand. He identifies as many as six narratives occurring across ISIS’s branded operations: “brutality, mercy,

⁵⁰ Winter, “Apocalypse Later,” 108.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., emphasis in original.

⁵³ Gloerick et al., “The Islamic State Unfiltered.”

victimhood, war, belonging, and utopianism.”⁵⁴ While Western pundits and audiences commenting on ISIS media tended to focus primarily on brutality narratives, reports often missed the ways that ISIS’s broader efforts to create branded lifestyle content worked in conversation with already circulating brand strategies of stoking engagement and building influence. The brutality thread garnered significant media attention for ISIS as a media brand, but the group’s ability to evoke feelings of belonging, particularly online, also serves to expand the brand’s reach and visibility via tacitly recruiting an informal labor force of ISIS sympathizers or “fanboys” who used their own social media channels to disseminate or amplify ISIS content.⁵⁵

In broad strokes, ISIS’s brand strategy involved crafting “a comprehensive brand, one that offers an alternate way of living.”⁵⁶ ISIS’s capacity to cohere a variety of affective engagements within the figure of one media organization’s branded vision of the world has definitively shifted the nature of digital insurgent practices by utilizing the neoliberal strategies of branding and social media optimization. It also reflects the forms of ambivalent politics that attach to brand culture, as discussed by Sarah Banet-Weiser, in which authenticity functions as the primary mode of assessing cultural value and legitimacy within a fractured neoliberal digital mediascape.⁵⁷ Intervening in the circulating distrust for institutions, brands cash in on alternativity to create affective bonds with those searching for these forms of cultural connections online.

⁵⁴ Charlie Winter, “Documenting the Virtual ‘Caliphate’: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy,” *The Quilliam Foundation*, 2015: 22-28.

⁵⁵ Gloerick et. al, 2016, “The Islamic State Unfiltered”; Roussinos “Jihadi Selfies”; Roussinos, “Behead First, Ask Questions Later”; Roussinos, “Unmasking of ShamiWitness.”

⁵⁶ Winter, “Documenting the Virtual ‘Caliphate’,” 6.

⁵⁷ Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM*.

The ambivalent forms of politics that accompany brand culture extends also to VICE Media, who utilized similar brand tactics to accomplish a similar goal of gaining visibility through pursuing viral content that played on users' interests in shocking content, belonging, utopianism, and alternative ways of living. As ISIS's brand image of brutality gained traction in Western contexts, VICE Media's unprecedented access to ISIS territory depicted in "The Islamic State" plays into the very desires that underlie what Winter has identified as a carefully-laid media trap—it drew attention to ISIS and even legitimized the group as a formidable and intensive threat to the U.S. and other Western nations. In fact, "The Islamic State" can also be read as extension of ISIS's tactical use of Western media outlets and/or informal modes of amplifying their content—categorized as "embedded reporting," journalist Medyan Dairieh only received access to ISIS-controlled territories and training facilities by participating in a controlled tour led by an official ISIS media officer. As the few criticisms of the VICE Media's "groundbreaking journalism" note, the documentary somewhat uncritically projects the image of an ISIS caliphate as it has been imagined and managed by a media-savvy team, leading some to question the relationship between this form of investigative reporting and officially sanctioned ISIS propaganda.⁵⁸

Turning to the videos themselves, a kinetic editing style of fast cuts intended to immerse viewers by juxtaposing stylized scenes with raw, shocking footage extends across both "The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV" and "The Islamic State." Each video opens with a sizzle reel of what's to come featuring many iconic symbols of ISIS's brand of violence already circulating across journalistic outlets: militants on tanks making performative donuts in the sand; men in flak jackets posing with machine guns and swords; and young boys

⁵⁸ March, "Is Vice's Documentary Illegal?"

proclaiming their commitment to IS and their mission to “kill the infidels.” In “The Islamic State,” we are then transported to a scene where a handheld camera shakes as the cameraman runs along the street accompanied by the sounds of gunfire to settle on its subjects’ actions: a group of young men perched atop the bed of a truck, working together to identify and shoot an off-screen attacker using a machine gun equipped to the truck. After being dropped into the middle of this chaotic scene, a voiceover announces: “This is Raqqa.” The rest of the video places the viewer in the middle of a variety of similar scenes featuring close-up firefights, patrols ensuring morality measures are being upheld, interviews with indoctrinated youth and IS sympathizers, and speeches made by ISIS officers. While some ISIS-crafted footage is interspersed throughout the captured footage, we are positioned alongside ISIS’s media team for most of the video, with little footage including the presence of the reporter. The primary source of orientation and context for the viewer is an added voiceover narration.

Comparing this kinetic formal approach with the techniques that ISIS videos deployed, one easily sees that both privilege action and movement over the communication of information or ideas. The video displays a wide range of cinematic techniques—ranging from satellite imagery of the Middle East region, drone footage over Iraq, high-definition footage of staged scenes in which ISIS militants perform their commitment to the group by way of burning passports, and embedded footage depicting frenetic scenes of murder. “The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV” also consisted of a loosely connected series of scenes that appealed more to the “visceral experience of murder” than to ideological or political information for potential recruits.⁵⁹ The video played a little more with aspects of framing and style than “The Islamic State,” opting for handheld camerawork in scenes that involved

⁵⁹ Marche, “ISIS’s Horrifying Propaganda.”

intensive moments, such as firing on civilian cars, and switching to a crosshair frame to mimic a first-person shooter video game's sniper vision. The video often plays into the decontextualized or juxtaposed tastes of various fringe internet cultures, overlaying kinetic scenes of targeted murder and violence with popular *anashid*, or jihadi hymns, in order to evoke the feelings of video game aesthetics or a music video. According to a close study of the *Clanging of the Swords* series, it “fosters IS [sic] identity and creates role models in a fandom-styled environment where users can create and upload their own images to praise videos like SAS and the worldview they depict.”⁶⁰ ISIS's media workers deployed a multi-platform strategy to amplify the video across various internet communities, using the rich visuals and affective experience of viewing the video to propel further visibility for the brand. According to Fisher and Purcha's study, they find that ISIS turned “its audio-visual propaganda into memes that [were] readable and comprehensible to a wide group of consumers—ranging from hard-core sympathizers to lesser initiated followers and even those who simply seek to make fun of IS [sic].”⁶¹ Using vernacular internet genres like cat memes, images from the original viral video gained further power as they reverberated outwards into various online communities.

The ambivalent viralities that accompanied both videos speaks to the crisis of viral, affective mediation. The twinned viral moments of these two videos suggest that attaining viral status via YouTube was a central strategy for fomenting both VICE Media and ISIS's global media brands, particularly as both brands utilized carefully crafted, intensive, and often controversial videos to gain visibility and influence for their brands. Both videos are

⁶⁰ Ali Fisher and Nico Purcha, “A Milestone for ‘Islamic State’ Propaganda: ‘The Clanging of the Swords, part 4,’” in Rudiger Lohlker, ed., *World Wide Warriors: How Jihadis Operate Online* (Vienna University Press: 2019).

⁶¹ Ibid.

distinct in their attention to both immersive formal choices, highly aestheticized iconography, elimination of all downtime, and pushing boundaries of comfortability with images of death. Several clips from “The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV,” despite not being shown on mainstream media outlets, were woven throughout the VICE Media production, often without on-screen citation or sourcing other than non-identified Arabic media logos in the corner of the screen. Throughout VICE’s “The Islamic State,” the video never draws attention to the thin line between its “embedded views” and ISIS propaganda; by trafficking in the journalistic values of access and the urgency of images, VICE’s video opts out of criticality. Instead, the viewer is positioned alongside the ISIS fighter, often literally riding along with ISIS militants as they narrate their acumen and power. The video places the viewer in the passenger seat, taking the ISIS militants’ and interviewed subjects’ claims to power and legitimacy at face value.

This analysis demonstrates the ways that virality—as a quantification of intensive affect—has come to play a large role in digital popular culture.⁶² In popular culture, it is sometimes used to identify or mark the popular precisely because it seemingly presents an “unmediated” form of popularity that emerges from the always-updating streams of content moving through and across digital platforms. In affect and media theory, virality is also increasingly used as a mode of assessing the complex relational encounters and contagious experiences that take shape in a connected and networked world. Understanding the representational and affective dynamics of virality within the context of contemporary digital cultures has developed alongside the proliferation of digital technologies and has morphed over time to reflect the various fears, threats, or joys associated with contagion. Virality can

⁶² See Patricia Clough and Jasbir K. Puar, “Introduction: The Viral,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 1–2 (2012): 13–26; Sampson, *Virality*.

also be understood as a form of measure within virtual and increasingly speculative spaces, albeit a form of measure that is all but transparent due to the opaque forms of algorithmic value assessment, circulation, and (dis)connection within the proprietary spaces of digital platforms.

Digital platforms, from Twitter to YouTube, value viral content for the ways they cause affective publics to take shape in response to a trend, topic, or video. On an economic level, the wealth of data and information that can be culled from these forms of intensive communication is valuable to platforms and their advertisers—not only can they gather insights from data about how to recreate the intensity and engagement produced by specific kinds of content, but this information is also helpful for how to tweak algorithmic forms of curation for increasing engagement and sell these insights to advertisers. Furthermore, viral trends that reverberate outwards into other mediated channels create feelings of community and commonality online within an increasingly fractured political and media landscape. As important as finding community online is for users, forging affective connections via “authentic” social media branding campaigns is also valuable to brands looking to extend their visibility via informal cultural meanings. Marketers latch onto viral trends in the attempt to monetize the viral moment, and brands are increasingly invested in attaching themselves nascently to viral stars. Yet, the underlying architectures of how to go viral or maintain a viral presence are rather opaque; the “soft structures” of digital platforms impact the forms of expression or kinds of content that circulate within and outside of digital contexts.

Turning back toward VICE Media and ISIS, the viral status of their branded content in 2014 seems to confirm that, as each brand’s number of viral videos increased, so too did the public perception of each brands’ legitimacy. To trace a speculative image of the viral

architectures contributing to VICE and ISIS's virality in 2014, it is important to examine the digital ecologies and economies surrounding viral video content. Specifically, each brand's capacity to produce "engaging" videos that both were stylistically produced and pushed boundaries of taste and comfortability launched each brand toward viral status. Despite only representing a small portion of each group's broader media production efforts, viral videos released onto user-generated video platforms, like YouTube, were central to each brand's media operations in 2014.

Viral Viscerality

As social media algorithms have continued to develop platform features and algorithmic infrastructures in order to pursue new horizons of monetization, the connections between affective engagement and profitable forms of virality have persisted. According to one former YouTube engineer "fiction is outperforming reality" across the platform, leading to many research endeavors that have shown how YouTube surfaces increasingly divisive or violent content via its "Recommended for You" feature and use of autoplay—both designed to maintain and extend total watch time.⁶³ By 2016, video became the central monetization focus across platforms, including close competitors Facebook and Google/YouTube, leading to an industry-wide bubble in video production.⁶⁴ The centrality of affect to algorithmic profit models is further evidenced by the very moves of platforms themselves; Stuart Cunningham and David Craig identify video in particular as a convergent focus for driving

⁶³ Paul Lewis, "'Fiction Is Outperforming Reality': How YouTube's Algorithm Distorts Truth," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2018.

⁶⁴ See previous chapter and Alexis C. Madrigal and Robinson Meyer, "The Facebook-Driven Video Push May Have Cost 483 Journalists Their Jobs," *The Atlantic*, October 18, 2018.

monetizable platform content across social media platforms.⁶⁵ While this strategy has been rather successful in drawing advertisers away from traditional television advertising, it has also raised some alarm about the externalities of the opaque methods behind programmatic advertising, virality, and the types of content that tend to surface in recommendation algorithms, which is not even to scrape the surface of impacts on creative labor. In a media ecosystem where publics form around viral content, it is important to understand how the underlying values, affordances, and motives of platforms shape the kinds of content that do go viral, as well as how platform affordances shape the ways users can interact with the content and with each other.

Most recently, YouTube has been at the center of debates around political radicalization, and as mentioned above it is also a central thread that connects the circulation of VICE Media's and ISIS's viral videos and brand strategies. Critics and researchers such as Zeynep Tufekci and Rebecca Lewis have scrutinized the politics of YouTube's algorithm for directing traffic across the site towards increasingly extreme content, as well as the relationship between creators of "alternative" content and the underlying values of the platform that facilitate their rise in visibility and influence.⁶⁶ Much of this work focuses either on the creative ways of "gaming" algorithmic recommendations to gain visibility or the centrality of the algorithms themselves in elevating divisive or extreme content. Yet, networks for extremist content or politics have preceded internet cultures; the ease of connectivity and sparse forms of content moderation pursued by digital platforms have only

⁶⁵ Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* (New York: New York University Press, 2019): 23.

⁶⁶ Zeynep Tufekci, "YouTube, the Great Radicalizer," *New York Times*, March 10, 2018. Rebecca Lewis, "Alternative Influence Network: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube," *Data & Society*, September 18, 2018; Rebecca Lewis, "'This Is What the News Won't Show You': YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-Celebrity," *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 201–17.

made these networks more publicly accessible across geographic distances and lowered the bar of entry. In other words, the surfacing of extreme or divisive content on platforms like YouTube is the product of both algorithmic forms of engagement (and their focus on forms of content monetization) *and* the tastes or interests of users. The networks of on- and off-platform sharing that amplify the reach of particular forms of content are the result of what Merlyna Lim has called “algorithmic enclaves,” where “human users and algorithms mutually shape and reshape each other in the sorting, classifying, and hierarchizing of individuals and contents, notably based on affect, and, therefore, they collectively shape the formation of [these] enclaves and the discourses that takes place within [them].”⁶⁷

Viral videos thus need to be unpacked for the ways that affective publics take shape around them, the ways that they are distributed and shared, and the forms of discourse that take shape within these publics or enclaves that contribute to their virality. There is a common thread throughout the discourse surrounding both “The Islamic State” and “The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV” about the visceral impact of both videos on viewers and its relationship to their virality online, especially when it comes to the different types of publics or communities that interact with each media brand. Yet the differences in their reception in mainstream networks gesture toward the different valences of digital virality. One form of virality is linked to discourses surrounding the viral that can trace back to xenophobic views about viruses, while the other is linked to forms of social or emotional contagion, where the popular is derived from shared feelings across diverse publics.⁶⁸ Regardless of these different

⁶⁷ Merlyna Lim, “Algorithmic Enclaves: Affective Politics and Algorithms in the Neoliberal Social Media Landscape,” in *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means*, ed. Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davies (New York: Routledge, 2021): 195.

⁶⁸ Tony Sampson discusses the differences and connections between what he calls the “immunologic” of terrorist contagion and “viral love” in his chapter “From Terror Contagion to the Virality of Love” in *Virality*: 127-157.

kinds of influence assigned by the publics that took shape around these two viral videos and their broader media brands, the videos' affective qualities provided a type of validation of their media power. Virality thus becomes a form of currency, and the remediation of viral videos both lends authenticity and value to particular forms of content and creates discernable moments around which publics emerge in an otherwise ambient stream of media texts.

Focusing on the particular context or structure of feeling online in 2014, the virality of the visceral aesthetics of “The Islamic State” and “The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV” suggests that the relationship between virality, underlying monetization interests for digital platforms, and the affective economies and publics that take shape in these places were attuned to experiences of visceral sensation. The OED cites two definitions for “visceral”: the first references the feeling or sensing capacities of the “viscera” or “internal organs” of the body, and the second proposes the visceral as “crude or elemental emotions” or “deep inward feelings,” both of which are primed toward attention to embodied knowledges rather than intellectual or cognitive capacities, such as logical or rational discourse. The tendency towards feeling online aligns with Papacharissi’s findings about how platforms and users utilize methods of affective attunement, particularly surrounding content that allows users to “feel” their way into politics.⁶⁹ But scholarship on digital cultures and economics have critiqued the rise of affective networks, finding that our non-conscious viscera and our “crude or elemental emotions” support the affect-extractive economies of digital platforms.

To take this further, it is important to analyze what types or modalities of affect become valuable to digital platforms. In this case, each brand’s particular focus on immersive

⁶⁹ Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*.

forms of storytelling and stylistic representations of edgy or taboo topics draws upon similar aestheticizations and insider views of violence. Taking together the industrial moves to surface high-quality YouTube channels that attract the most engagement with the already circulating fears and desires to visualize ISIS's brutality, the virality of "The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV" and "The Islamic State" demonstrates how immersive experiences of risk, danger, or brutality reflect a deeper entanglement between circulating affective content, platform monetization, and distributions of value within digital culture in 2014. In other words, the underlying architectures of virality determined by platforms inform the resonances between both organizations' brand strategies and their most viral content—architectures that continuously surface videos that engage viewers at the "gut," a modality of affect that we can call *viscerality*.

The visceral as a form of affect represents a deep form of feeling or movement, often through, with, or in the gut, that is more immediate than more common affective states. Visceral forms of perception operate at an even fleshier level of non-cognitive sensation than other forms affective engagement. According to Brian Massumi, what distinguishes viscerality, or interoception, as a specific mode of perception distinct other forms of affect and sensation is that it inverts the stimulus-response directionality of proprioception (from the outside, in, and back) by instead "register[ing] excitations gathered by the five 'exteroceptive' senses."⁷⁰ Through bypassing the layer of the skin and the body's surfaces, viscerality produces a more immediate sensibility that precedes bodily contact.

Massumi demonstrates this through an example that highlights the role of environment, gut, and intensity that viscerality produces:

⁷⁰ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 60.

Walking down a dark street at night in a dangerous part of town, your lungs throw a spasm before you consciously see and can recognize as human the shadow across your path. As you cross a busy noonday street, your stomach turns somersaults before you consciously hear and identify the sound of screeching brakes that careens toward you... The immediacy of visceral perception is so radical that it can be said without exaggeration to precede the exteroceptive sense perception... It registers *intensity*.⁷¹

Described in this way, viscerality seems to be less of a reaction to a visual or tactile stimulus or sensation felt on the surface of the body and more of an attunement to the milieu or organization of forces and potentialities within a surrounding environment. This description of the perceptual intensity and immediacy of viscerality has yet another layer for Massumi: “Viscerality is the perception of suspense. The space into which it jolts the flesh is one of an inability to act or reflect, a spasmodic passivity, so taut a receptivity that the body is paralyzed until it is jolted back into action-reaction by recognition.”⁷²

These forms of non-conscious, visceral movements toward or away from objects are valuable to media companies and platforms alike. The power of viscerality to perceive and induce suspense is potentially lucrative for brands who wish to gain visibility and clout online. But what is more important to the context of VICE Media, ISIS, and broader conceptualizations of an economy of visceral video is precisely this ability to render bodies inert, “spasmodically passive,” and highly receptive by providing an experience of intensity. Chris Ip’s report on VICE Media for *Columbia Journalism Review* argues that VICE’s appeal for viewers is through its ability to affectively capture attention online, stating that

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

“video that appears to be real hits the viewers viscerally, cuts through the noise of the internet, and shares well on social media.”⁷³ There is a connection between what is considered “real” and immediate and a video’s capacity to engage viewers viscerally, which is also tied to taking an oppositional stance to the formulaic or “mainstream.”⁷⁴ VICE Media’s capacity to appeal to viewers’ visceral perceptions results in a state of suspension whereby something emerges from the noise of digital networks because of its realness, or to use Massumi’s terminology, its intensity.

VICE Media’s videos, particularly “The Islamic State,” capitalize on circulating desires for visceral content that is packaged in a highly stylized aesthetic. Sensorial immediacy and immersion are key frameworks that privilege intensity of sensation over logical forms of informational address. Rather than provide depth of information, the VICE host’s movement through energetic environments like warzones stimulates the sense of “taut receptivity” and suspension described by Massumi. Following the movements of the host through scenes of potential death, interspersed with low-quality video inserts of actual death, contributes to the sense of virtual embodiment for the viewer. Ip’s article gestures to this pattern during his discussion of VICE’s Baltimore coverage following the death of Freddie Gray, stating that “we don’t learn much new information about the racial dynamics in Baltimore or the consequences of the protests... but we do get a visceral sense of what the place is like.”⁷⁵ Instead of statistics or legacies of police misconduct, VICE provides a sense of visceral, yet virtual, presence, where we can “see the density of protesters out on the street,

⁷³ Ip, “The Cult of Vice.”

⁷⁴ More specifically, he states that “Vice’s brand of video-making is built on a style the company calls ‘immersionism’—an ostensibly raw aesthetic that resonates with world-weary audiences distrustful of shiny, formulaic programming. So far, it seems that everything to which Vice applies its formula becomes unpretentious.” Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

and the double middle fingers they throw at police, the shine of sweat on a 32-year-old Baltimore resident who wants the media to leave, and the silent, intimidating line of riot police with batons and clear shields.”⁷⁶

If this visceral approach to video production catalyzed both VICE Media’s and ISIS’s emergence as viral brands, this occurrence was bred through experimentations with what garners attention online. According to one investigation of ISIS as a media brand:

If the media unit was getting closer to its breakthrough in the highly influential video category, success certainly did not come easy. While IS [sic] media had produced videos since 2004, five years later the videos had improved in professional quality but not in content, consisting of tedious political broadsides against their enemies that mostly contained outtakes from Western and Arab media.⁷⁷

The series of “misses” and experimentations that eventually produced ISIS’s handful of viral video hits challenges some of the dominant paradigms used to understand ISIS’s brand of image warfare. Marwan Kraidy’s work in particular has closely analyzed a range of IS media and discursive objects for their cultural logics, particularly as they relate to dynamics of global media.⁷⁸ In “The Projectilic Image: Islamic State’s Digital Visual Warfare and Global Networked Affect,” Kraidy also lands on affect, offering a vision for how images play an increasingly weaponized role in the distribution of fear and terror within what he calls the “global networked affect” facilitated by the networked nature of digital cultures.⁷⁹ Through his analysis of ISIS literature and videos, he offers that ISIS is a prime

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Whiteside, “Lighting the Path.” 17.

⁷⁸ Kraidy, “The Projectilic Image.”

⁷⁹ Ibid.

case for studying the projectilic nature of affective images, where images mimic “fast, lethal, penetrative objects.”⁸⁰ While Kraidy’s attention to aesthetic patterns of movement and stasis dovetail with my analysis of the visceral qualities of VICE Media’s and ISIS’s videos, the failures of earlier ISIS media, alongside new media theories on virality, complicate his vision of carefully weaponized images, targeted projectiles, and penetrative objects.

Tony D. Sampson’s work on virality contests the ability to use images in a projectilic nature as Kraidy suggests.⁸¹ Sampson argues that viral trends or products are successful not because they find “the perfect hipster to infect,” but rather because they successfully gauge “the public mood.”⁸² Virality, therefore, is less about the “stickiness of brands or the infected consumers” and more about “the infectability of the affective atmospheres in which consumption takes place.”⁸³ Thus, while the metaphor of a projectile captures the intensity and movement engaged by the visceral affect animated by ISIS content, its aim can never be one that is easily operationalized. In other words, Sampson’s Tardean virality refutes Kraidy’s claims that image warfare today involves finding the right people to target with precisely the right images and ideological encodings.⁸⁴ Similar to VICE’s outsized claims to have unique hold in global youth cultures due to their combination of data-driven targeting and penchant for viral video hits, Kraidy’s concept of projectilic images assigns too much finesse to a media department that had its fair share of flops, as much as any creator trying to

⁸⁰ Ibid., 194.

⁸¹ Sampson, *Virality*. I read Sampson’s work as critiquing the discourse of infection as a modality for understanding virality, arguing instead to understand the social contagions that drive virality and affective atmospheres.

⁸² Ibid., 112.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ We can find similar fallacies in the marketing discourse of programmatic advertising, in which digital advertising services claim to be able to target the “perfect” individual (demographically/psychographically) to infect/expose to targeted ads. Here, digital data reduces human subjectivity and affect in ways similar to the long-criticized “hypodermic needle” hypothesis.

“go viral.” The main problem with the idea of the projectile in a digital age is assuming the targetability of an audience or specific viewer.⁸⁵

Sampson’s exploration of virality through the lens of Tardean theories of crowd behavior argues this point succinctly, stating that “the problem for viral marketers, it would seem, is that contagion appears to be all but out of control... The chaotic rhythm of contagious encounter is indeed easy to observe but not so easy to control.”⁸⁶ This seems to be evidenced by the rise and fall of VICE’s video empire between 2013 and 2018, as well as by the decline in viral videos from ISIS around the same time. While ISIS’s media regime unquestionably utilizes an intelligent and strategic deployment of aesthetics, iconography, and social media savvy, placing ISIS within a context of circulating visceral videos complicates how things move and spread online. Content and discourse in digital publics move through circuits that are guided by the circulations of affects. According to Sampson, “[i]t is the porous volatility of the political mind to the feelings and suggestions of others (up close and mediated over distance) that leads to an important question for contagion theory: is it not what ‘we feel’ about what spreads that becomes the most effectual contagion of all?”⁸⁷ The complex dynamics and politics of virality challenges scholarly positioning of ISIS’s video production as a form of tactical weaponization. What Sampson’s insights into virality do suggest, however, is that what is more significant to understand is the way that environments are primed for specific types of affective contagion.

⁸⁵ Certainly, the group utilized iconography from recent media events to build their brand of terror and create visceral images, such as the use of orange jumpsuits as an index of tortured prisoners at Guantanamo Bay (evidenced in a long history of beheading and torture videos following Daniel Pearl’s murder) and the use of all-black outfits to index the torture endured by prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. These images’ circulation can also be described as viral, which lends these references semiotic and affective intensity for global audiences (although the affects attached to them similarly move between shock/horror and curiosity/spectacle).

⁸⁶ Sampson, *Virality*, 95.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

Branding enters this picture because brands help cohere an easily identifiable mood or speak to a specific public. They also, as Sarah Banet-Weiser has argued, increasingly shape our forms of expression and affective attachments in a neoliberal landscape that benefits from the political ambivalence engendered by branded forms of culture and politics.⁸⁸ The umbrella of the brand also connects seemingly disparate content and different networked publics or enclaves—the coexistence of VICE Media’s and ISIS’s visceral videos alongside a network of softer lifestyle content suggests that branding provides the space for a multipronged approach to capturing viewer attention and directing it to worlds of content subsumed under one brand.

As further evidence of the value of branding, marketers are increasingly interested in collecting biometric and psychographic data aimed at gauging affective atmospheres in order to predict new trends or redirect the affective markers of a brand to keep up with the movements of their target audiences. Sampson details the discursive and material reality of this shift towards the affective gaming of consumer desires by discussing the marketing trend towards generating affective “worlds” or “atmospherics.”⁸⁹ Like this, Sampson observes a Tardean trajectory in corporate and political strategies intent on gradually “build[ing] up small changes into something significant without a guiding hand.” This includes “the creation and management, at-a-distance, of active epidemiological spaces, in which affective contagions can be more readily produced, engineered, and traded.”⁹⁰

These dynamics of branding also apply to digital forms of warfare. In a chapter unpacking the precursors and functionings of “terror contagion,” Sampson provides a more

⁸⁸ Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM*

⁸⁹ Sampson, *Virality*, 112-113.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

atmospheric approach to terror media: “fear mongering is not simply encoded into messages and conveyed through meaningful media channels. Efforts to persuade involve what Thrift has called ‘premediation,’ which in this context requires the potentialization and readying of moods to prepare the way for contagion.”⁹¹ What Sampson suggests is it’s not necessarily about the process of successful weaponization of images that produced the virality of ISIS or VICE Media, but rather it was the desire for fear and chaos already introduced and circulating in these atmospheres that primed their contagious spread.

The Politics of Viscerality

Producing visceral videos was central for building brand visibility, legitimacy, and relevance for both brands, and connects circulating visceral politics—as identified by Mbembe—with the ways that virality acts to quantify, monetize, and distribute affective value within digital culture. It signals that, at least in 2014, there was a broader economy of digital videos that utilized visceral appeals to gain virality, particularly by connecting videos utilizing an immersive, visceral aesthetic to a particular brand identity based on shock and disruption. As media brands with goals of empire-building, both ISIS and VICE Media capitalized on circulating interests in embodied experiences of risk, danger, and terror within specific digital communities and broader circuits of media attention. Politically, virality as a measure of cultural value tends to reorient epistemological regimes to favor the transmission of intensity and authenticity in an age of destabilized institutions, thereby seemingly empowering (but also exploiting) the affective labor of everyday users as they engage with and pass along viral content.

⁹¹ Ibid., 127.

Despite the popularity of each media brand's softer lifestyle content, the virality of "The Clanging of the Swords, pt. IV" and "The Islamic State" and their similar narratological, iconographic, and aesthetic choices in 2014 solidified each brand's identity as a source of shocking content. For ISIS, it was the move to a branded approach to media production aimed at the gut (as opposed to one justifying a particular ideology) that distinguished ISIS's "brand of terror" and its meteoric rise in visibility. It also tied ISIS media's virality and visceral appeal to its capacity to continue to shock. According to Simon Cottee, the proliferation of visceral, provocative, or arresting videos is responding to the cacophonous nature of digital culture, where "the rise of the Internet has meant that there is simply too much information out there vying for attention."⁹² To "cut through the noise," videos need to hit viewers viscerally, creating new thresholds for mediated intensity. For Cottee, ISIS's reliance on visceral intensities in a broader cross-media attention economy has "unfortunately, has served to reinforce the demonic logic of ISIS's brand of terrorism, which requires not only surpassing previous atrocities, but trumping other global news events."⁹³

VICE Media also competes in this brand-organized attention economy—the company's visceral immersions have been similarly characterized as affect-forward and information-light, such as some who find the VICE approach to be a sensational "shock first, explain later" aestheticization of violence, taboo, and abjection.⁹⁴ Both brands waded into the affect-driven incentives of viral publics, in which context is eschewed for immediate experience and simplified narratives. In other words, "the parts that sell" (politically, affectively) are often those that provide viewers with visceral immediacy while maintaining a

⁹² Cottee, "ISIS and the Logic of Shock."

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Aimen Khalid Butt, "The Vice Approach: Shock First, Explain Later (If Ever)," *World Policy*, April 16, 2013.

narrative approach in which “viewers are deprived of the context of what’s actually going on.”⁹⁵ It is thus significant that both videos engage viewers viscerally while remaining rather light on information, ideology, or context. Focusing on “the visceral experience of murder” casts a large net in that it stimulates engagement via negative, positive, and ambivalent reactions through its appeal to gut feelings that have yet to be codified or translated into emotions.

Media theorists that frame digital media platforms’ interests as predatory view the rise of affective mediation as a way for tech companies and advertisers to manipulate users’ subconscious desires and pave the way for what Sampson calls a “somnambulist society.” Drawing again on Tardean theory, Sampson argues that the power of virality is not that it helps build connective or collective articulations of the popular through digitally mediated channels, but rather that it demonstrates that affect—and sociocultural habits and tendencies that take shape on a non-conscious level—is leaky and contagious.⁹⁶ Since affect stresses the relationality between subject-object and self-other, affect becomes the central currency in a digital culture freed from the constraints of national or regional media systems. Social media platforms—and the advertisers who benefit from this collective imitation—are increasingly investing in research that helps them to predict, reroute, or track the imitative of rays, leaving a bigger question of which viral affects and videos articulate a globally connected affect and which have been constructed to increase corporate profits.⁹⁷

In this environment of doubt and instability, decontextualized claims about the “real” circulate and muddy the waters of legitimacy and fabrication,⁹⁸ and gut-level modes of

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Sampson, *The Sleepwalker’s Guide to Social Media*.

⁹⁷ Lim, “Algorithmic Enclaves.”

⁹⁸ Of course, Adorno and Horkheimer would say this was always contested ground.

thinking become the horizon for determining authenticity and one's relationship to content circulating online. In fact, the circulation of intensive affects has become central to cultural production, community formation, and, effectively, monetary value online. What has become increasingly clear in studies of digital culture across platforms, genres, and personalities, is that today's media, news, and entertainment culture is driven primarily by desires to quantify and amplify circulating affect, both from a standpoint of trying to understand what is true based on an internalized dependence on metrics and from the viewpoint of advertisers.

Mbembe's arguments about the politics of viscosity help us understand this tension: on one hand, there is a fight for liberal democracy and social media platforms' perception as tools for free expression and forging community; on the other, there is the ever-expanding reach of global finance capital, which is not interested in facilitating radical communities, but rather is invested in commodifying and enclosing such spaces in order to prime them towards further consumption. At the center of this tension is virality, affect, and Mbembe's visceral politics—it is precisely this ambiguous form of mediated intensity that makes extreme videos economically viable for platforms, forms of self-branding, and marketers alike. Visceral forms of engagement, when tied to shock, disruption, and brand logics, enclose on viewers' affective capacities for the purpose of priming attention while simultaneously laying claim to truth based on the weak connection that virality is democratically determined.

In some ways, this reflects what Patricia Clough argues is an economization of affect—*itself* (or in this case our viscera), particularly as viral viscosity in this form valorizes the circulation of shocking images of human suffering. She writes:

The ongoing graphic circulation of the horrible conditions of individual and populations is a political and economic resource of profitable information,

even as the local settings of the terrors of endless war go on being economically and politically devastated. As such, the humanitarian appeal is to attend to, to care for, an appeal that is entangled with the appeal for unending war. The appeal produces a surplus value of affect, available for reinvesting the political economy of aesthetic capitalism, which is entangled with the governing of affect or the not-yet-lived at the point of emergence, where ontopower is shadowed by necropolitics.⁹⁹

The proliferation of shocking images has a long history, which many postcolonial and abolitionist scholars have critiqued as tied to the broader (often imperialist) economic and interventionist logics that mobilize humanitarian witnessing publics.¹⁰⁰ Similar visceral images have also been critiqued by television scholars, who long decried the “aestheticization of suffering” that was part of television’s assertion of its unique ability to mediate emergency, crisis, and catastrophe.¹⁰¹ While these deeper histories were often tied to the centralizing role of mass media in their imaging of the nation (and its enemies), social media’s proliferation has given rise to a proliferating economy of visceral images and viral politics. “The Islamic State” video’s rise to viral status validated VICE’s value and influence, acting to quell skepticism around their approach to journalism by tapping into an affective economy invested in consuming shocking, visceral, “insider views” into ISIS-occupied

⁹⁹ Patricia Clough, *The User Unconscious: On Affect, Media, and Measure* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018): 29.

¹⁰⁰ I unpack this history further in the next chapter, but I am inspired by Avery Gordon’s criticism of Susan Sontag’s investment in shocking images. She writes: “Death and mutilation are part of war’s barbarity and also powerful icons of it. But what if we consider the causes of war and militarism more generally? What is the picture of a society that spends, like the United States does, close to \$800 billion dollars a year on military, police, prisons, and so-called national security?” Avery Gordon, “The Disasters of War,” *Fast Capitalism* 2, no. 1 (2006).

¹⁰¹ Chouliaraki, “The Aestheticization of Suffering.” She draws on Mary Ann Doane’s canonical work: Mary Ann Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990): 222-239.

territory. Awarding the video a Peabody Award also authenticated VICE's visceral style, in which journalism's value is increasingly mediated by the financial investments of platforms—engagement at all cost. As I have argued in chapter two, “The Islamic State” video was part of a series of viral “stunt journalism” endeavors that primed the market for an investment in for-profit digital video news, solidifying the VICE model of digital reporting as the solution to various problems across the media and journalism industries over approaches that took less sensorial and sensational approaches.

At a broader level, the way visceral aesthetics drove viral content in 2014 gestures toward what Clough has called “the datalogical turn,” in which bodies are constituted through interfaces with biotechnical data capture.¹⁰² The datalogical is demonstrated in the ways that the monetary value of viral content—regardless of its informational/cultural quality or the forms of the affects it induces—is produced through its capacity to produce affective intensity. In other words, affective intensities reverberate between offline and online worlds, in which the lines between algorithmically produced connectivities and offline feelings of community and identity often blur; in this space, those who can gain the most visibility via their ability to work with the underlying, affective values of commercial algorithms, create the terrain of the datalogical.¹⁰³ Yet, these intensities are always tied to the differential values of a commercial, ad-driven marketplace for attention, in which some bodies' affective orientations are more valuable than others. Both ISIS's and VICE Media's claims to revolutionary affective engagements through the imagery of political violence and imperial

¹⁰² Patricia Clough, “The Datalogical Turn,” in *Non-Representational Methodologies*, ed. Phillip Vannini (New York: Routledge, 2015): 154.

¹⁰³ Lim has also detailed this by way of a rise globally in “algorithmic politics,” which is both informed by the significant role of media (and the older, pre-platform internet) in activist and grassroots organizing and the ways that algorithmic publics increasingly self-select into “algorithmic enclaves.” See: Merlyna Lim, “From Activist Media to Algorithmic Politics: The Internet, Social Media, and Civil Society in Southeast Asia,” in *Routledge Handbook of Civil and Uncivil Society in Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2023).

brutality demonstrates circulating desires for and economies of viscerally impactful imagery and branded, visceral political visions.

In many ways, these twinned viral moments provide insight into the central tension of digital politics today: can we use these infrastructural tools of connection to imagine a different world, or will these eschatological discussions result in the “brutal survivalism” and “negative messianism” Mbembe describes in his vision of today’s visceral politics? In her work on *The Visceral Logics of Decolonization*, Neetu Khanna offers a different orientation to visceral politics, arguing that both the durability and fragility of colonial regimes hangs on the attunement of our viscera to perceptions of self and other.¹⁰⁴ In other words, our visceral responses are deeply entangled with the affective contagions that produce both revolutionary and colonial impulses, desire, and tastes. While her focus maps a decolonial visceral aesthetic enacted by the Progressive Writers’ Association in mid-20th century India, her arguments gesture towards why viscosity is the “emotive energetic” source of both “colonial and revolutionary affect.”¹⁰⁵ These are both inherently tied to mediated encounters with others: “the visceral appears only in moments of encounter—in other words, in the dynamics that ‘set off’ or trigger the visceral response of the racialized subject. The somatic response is triggered by the proximity and presence of other bodies: bodily energies and actions inscribed in dense relations of power and alterity.”¹⁰⁶ These encounters, when routed through a decolonial viscosity geared toward commonality rather than spectacularized difference, can result in the reordering of visceral responses against colonial distributions of sense and

¹⁰⁴ Neetu Khanna, *The Visceral Logics of Decolonization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020): 3.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 10.

sensation, self and other, instead of doubling down on phantasmagoric encounters with terroristic violence.

In a neoliberal landscape dominated by brand culture and the marketing of difference and identity, finding this commonality is vital and difficult to accomplish. Extending the transformation of the politics of visibility into an economics of visibility, as Sarah Banet-Weiser contends, has taken yet another step towards an *economics of viscosity*. Viscerality has become a horizon of capture for capitalist and political enclosure and forms of affective priming. Since viscosity is a form of affect or sensation that begins inward in the gut, appealing to our visceral, and therefore precognitive sense capacities, it carries with it the ability to condition our cognitive and subcognitive desires and tamper with even what we consciously view as “ostensibly calculated decisions.”¹⁰⁷ Shocks of all kinds to sensory systems, from economic shocks to the shock of terror attacks, both depend upon and are ways to reorder the distribution of the sensible in the moment of suspense and intensity brought about by visceral perception. This can be a powerful form for redirecting affectivity towards decolonial methods, but it also can serve as a mode of concretizing imperial relations, as evidenced by VICE Media’s and ISIS’s use of a forms of visceral aesthetics that are tied more deeply to colonial and imperial desires rather than a collective reckoning with the inherent violence of imperialism and extractive capitalism writ large.

¹⁰⁷ Sampson, *Virality*, 114.

Chapter Four

The VICE Guide to Cosmopolitics: Tracing Documentary Frictions in VICE's Media Empire

“Risk and violence and pain and love, these are all things that can look very different, but at the end of the day they tap into the same feeling.” This is the voiceover track to a trailer advertising VICE’s relaunch of their flagship newsmagazine/documentary series on Showtime.¹ Airing in 2020, the now-canceled series claimed to deliver “immersive reporting from the frontlines of global conflicts, civil uprisings, and beyond, and tackling untold and complex geopolitical stories from all corners of the globe.” Despite maintaining the same bombastic and spectacular visual style as the original HBO series, this opening narration reveals an updated, more polished positionality toward VICE’s brand of news than the Shane Smith-era voiceover of “exposing the absurdity of the modern condition.” This shift from “absurdity” to “complex geopolitical stories” indexes VICE’s internal changes across this time period, which saw the brand move from documenting the global “weird” to an award-winning source of journalism and social documentary content produced and distributed across a network that included at least 34 and speculatively up to 80 global outposts.² Notably, the attention to intensive affective states—risk, violence, pain, love—draws a throughline across VICE’s extended network³ to author a poetic notion of the cosmopolitan: what connects us globally is our human capacity to feel intensely.

Following the company’s success in the digital news bubble (chapter two) and subsequent rise to viral popularity via its visceral aesthetics (chapter three), VICE used its

¹ HBO canceled the show in 2019, presumably after the multiple exposes published in late 2018.

² Andrew Wallenstein, “Vice’s Shane Smith Signs Deals Around the World to Spread His Brand,” *Variety*, December 14, 2016.

³ Note that this network is likely unraveling today in the aftermath of VICE’s bankruptcy.

multi-million-dollar investments from media, tech, and advertising giants to pursue an aggressive global expansion of its distribution and production networks. From 2017-2020, VICE pursued a lofty goal of operating in 80 countries, an astronomical expansion from their original reach of 34 countries. While its surface mission was to connect millennial audiences with globally produced, youth-made, and cutting-edge content, it did so through a capitalist framework and a discursive positioning of “world domination” by way of building a “world of VICE” or “VICE Media Empire.”⁴ For CEO Shane Smith, the desire to construct an empire of VICE was driven by the seductions of financial gain, but more importantly by his desire for centralized cultural power in an increasingly platform-driven media world. Speaking with *Forbes* in the early 2010’s, Smith once claimed:

[W]e’re the world’s largest producer of premium video content on the web, that [sic] we have the world’s biggest brands in our pocket, so we can monetize, we have long time on site, we’re great at engagement, we do experiential, we do everything they don’t do. So if Facebook, for example, would wake up and say, oh, we’re going to go public and we can tick off monetization, content, engagement, all these things... and the reason why I would do that is if we became the network for Facebook or the network of Google, we’d achieve that dream of mine overnight of being the next CNN, the next ESPN or the next MTV with the largest audience in the world. And it would be hard to say no to that, not because of the money but because of the

⁴ “Vice Aims for World Domination with New Deals in 51 Countries,” *Ad Age*, 22 June 22 2016.

fucking cultural impact you would have. At this point I don't give a shit about money. I'm worth more money than I can ever spend.⁵

In some ways, this characterization of VICE's media empire epitomizes imperial/colonial relations, wherein new outposts in the sprawling empire function as a space for inward and outward flows—notably, cheaply or freely extracted resources flow into the core while the end products flow back to the edges to economically and politically shore up the core's central power. From this vantage point, VICE's media empire simply refreshes older models of Schiller's media imperialism thesis, wherein Western products infiltrate and remake the cultural outputs of non-Western or Southern nations.⁶ Yet, the global adoption of digital media infrastructures and the twinned rise in new regional media hubs and spread of neoliberal ideologies have shown that such totalizing frameworks fail to describe the constellations of power that emerge out of increasingly complex media flows.

Studying global media and global cultural politics today involves contending with ever-shifting power structures, alliances, and disjunctures. Instead of totalizing visions that describe media power in terms of domination, this chapters place the VICE video into the complex dynamics at work within the space of an increasingly connected world by considering VICE through the lens of what Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar have called “the global-popular.”⁷ By linking the global and the popular through the hyphen, Ghosh and Sarkar articulate the entanglements between the local and the global at the site of

⁵ Jeff Bercovici, “Vice's Shane Smith on What's Wrong With Canada, Facebook and Occupy Wall Street” (Forbes, January 3, 2012). Notably journalists have reported that Smith skimmed off millions from the company's various investments. See Max Tani, “Shane Smith Made More than \$100 Million from Vice,” *Semafor*, March 20, 2023.

⁶ Today, these claims to Western media dominance have been largely debunked for their Western-centric views, which robs non-Western so-called “others” from their own critical interpretations, reimaginings, and resistances to Western media and culture.

⁷ Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar, “The Global-Popular: A Frame for Contemporary Cinemas,” *Cultural Critique* 114 (2022): 1-22.

the popular, which is neither filled with visions of a homogenous, hegemonic cosmopolitan globality nor with romanticized notions of local cultures outside of global media circulations. Rather, they examine the intimacies and contradictions that happen at the conjunction between global and popular, in which “the global becomes a pluriverse whose constituents are partial, localized, and emergent. Simultaneously, the rise of the global as the salient aspirational horizon, eclipsing earlier principles of organizing communal affiliations and future visions (civilization, religion, nation), provides new channels of articulation for local-popular energies.”⁸ Identifying VICE as a global-popular cultural formation involves asking deeper questions about what part of this pluriverse VICE content speaks to, and with whom its branded world visions resonate. Smith’s aspirational posturing aside, his (and VICE’s) ability to conquer media markets is a reductive explanation for VICE’s global popularity. For example, some VICE outposts continue operating today despite the company’s recent bankruptcy, born by the popularity of their media production within their regional or local contexts.⁹

In what follows, I unpack the animating forces undergirding VICE’s rise as a globally popular media brand, which I have argued throughout this dissertation is deeply tied to its production of viral—and often visceral—digital videos. I do so by analyzing the VICE video as a mode of commercial-popular documentary infused with the self-documentary practices of progressive social media use. Following the release of “The Islamic State” and its bombastic first season on HBO, “the VICE video” emerged as a crystallized media format in global urban youth culture as both a youth-oriented challenge to traditional Western

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Notably, the Australian and Indonesian VICE bureaus continue to function rather autonomously from the Williamsburg office.

journalistic values and an index of millennial desires and tastes. Henrik Bodker described VICE's journalism as a "hybrid" approach to news, which "largely alternates between minute-by-minute, long-form video coverage and incensed, media-reflexive analysis and thus mixes amateur aesthetics, immersive approaches, and ethics of witnessing with commentary."¹⁰ According to Bodker, this hybridity reflects the "collaborative flow" of social media atmospheres and is geared toward the tastes and aesthetics of a global audience imbued with a "cosmopolitan disposition."¹¹ Through his analysis of VICE's coverage of the Ferguson, Missouri Black Lives Matter uprisings in 2014, Bodker positions VICE's approach as "ideally a global platform that allows a transnational generation to position itself in relation to questions of equality, human, and civil rights."¹² In this description, Bodker asserts that VICE's hybrid news production is steeped both in the affective valences and collaborative flows of social media and social media's emergent role as facilitator of activist and social justice organizing.¹³

In this description, Bodker reiterates assumptions about the relationship between the global, the digital, and social progressivism. Namely, Bodker's analysis elucidates scholarly and popular investments in participatory media and activist documentary as primary methods for creating a more just, inclusive world. Here, in the converged spaces of digital platforms, we see a twinned investment in, first, social media as a democratization of voice, visibility, and media power; and second, deep-held investments in documentary and non-fiction media as primary avenues for documenting and visibilizing suffering, inequality, and human rights

¹⁰ Henrik Bødker, "Vice Media Inc.: Youth, Lifestyle – and News," *Journalism* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

¹² *Ibid.*, 39.

¹³ He also makes an assertion that the VICE video is imbued with what he sees as the cosmopolitan dynamics of global digital publics invested in digital social change, which is part of a longer history of Western thought that ties technological innovation to linear societal progress.

violations. Undergirding these utopian hopes for a digital democracy is the digital's entanglements with dreams for cosmopolitan civil society, in which access to more voices and images on digital networks will bring about a just society through bearing witness to and policing human rights abuses and gifting platforms for voicing to marginalized communities. This is also evidenced in documentary studies, in which novel assessments of documentary's impacts outside and beyond the text itself have celebrated digital and mobile technologies as vital for building a resistant visual commons, in which "the documentary impulse as a way of life and articulation of political information and democratic exchange constitute new patterns of public communication."¹⁴

Combined with the VICE video's affective and purportedly "immersive" approach to digital storytelling, Bodker's analysis of VICE's storytelling value places it within the vexed terrain of popular or liberal documentary practice; yet it also fails to grapple with documentary's historical attachments to colonial fantasy and image politics. VICE's intensive push toward global distribution and empire-building gestures toward a desire for documentary content that visibilizes the weird, the creative, and the marginal—in other words a "world of VICE." Yet, promising a "world of vice" built on the connective feelings of a transnational, cosmopolitan, and digitally connected youth culture raises important questions regarding the role of documentary in digital video economies and ecologies. While promising innovation, VICE's focus on "equality, human, and civil rights" reinvents problematic documentary tropes steeped in colonial visual regimes, such as what Brian Winston has called "the tradition of the victim" in documentary production.¹⁵ In this

¹⁴ Angela J. Aguayo, *Documentary Resistance: Social Change and Participatory Media* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 227.

¹⁵ Brian Winston, "The Tradition of the Victim in Griersonian Documentary," in: *New Challenges for Documentary* (University of California Press, 1988): 269-287.

tradition, the practice of documentary capture is infused with the moralizing narratives of victimhood and salvation but steeped in the visual rhetoric of nineteenth-century ethnographic productions, which depicted exoticized subjects “whose deviance was sufficiently interesting to attract and hold our attention.”¹⁶ In other words, visibilizing “a world of VICE” traffics in the presentism of many digital revolutionary discourses, which must—as Anna Tsing has argued—conjure their value via increasingly speculative and spectacular imaginative acts in order to manifest cultural and economic capital.¹⁷

Thus, I want to consider VICE’s mediation of the global and “immersive” form of witnessing in this chapter through the lens of documentary, particularly as it relates to questions of postcolonial/decolonial politics and the biopolitical work of humanitarian documentary. Boundary-pushing, “raw,” and transgressive, VICE’s “immersionist” approach to storytelling challenges the often-sober discourses of documentaries by taking seemingly innocuous topics, like internet fandoms and drug cultures, seriously and making serious topics, like war and humanitarian crises, more digestible. In doing so, VICE’s videos operate as both informative and sensational, exploitative and illuminating.¹⁸

Similar to the theoretical track of the previous chapter, instead of lionizing VICE as a company uniquely tapped into the pulse of global youth culture (as many of its self-descriptions espouse), I want to place VICE’s “immersionist” visualities in conversation with scholarship contending with the complexities of the global, the popular, and the global-popular. As has become clear in the previous two chapters, VICE’s emphasis on internet-

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ In some of its more “true crime” oriented documentaries in particular, VICE’s videos are able to occupy the liminal spaces between media genres in an age of convergent media, adopting the titillating tactics of taboo media like tabloids, snuff, and porn, filtered through the lens of “serious” documentary.

distributed video allowed the company to evade neat categorization. Positioned between “news” and “documentary,” VICE utilized the institutional disruptions of the unregulated Internet to develop its “innovative,” immersionist style. While previous chapters have explored debates about VICE’s space within the fields of journalism and early internet cultures, here I want to place VICE’s global mediations within a tradition of documentary filmmaking of distant cultures in order to discuss the state of postcolonial visualities in a world (many worlds?) awash with truth claims, participatory media, and political struggles for representation and visibility. Drawing on feminist postcolonial scholarship on documentary and postcolonial visibilities, such as that by Rey Chow and Pooja Rangan, this chapter grapples with the state of documentary, participatory media, and digital video.¹⁹ I utilize close readings of various VICE videos and their digital and geopolitical contexts in order to parse the visual connectivities and disjunctures that mediate cross-cultural encounters at various levels. In other words, this chapter attempts to answer a question from Chow that haunts the viral circulations of visceral politics and the performativity and mutability of digital video cultures in a platform-dominant visual ecology: “has the ubiquity of such commodified visibilities replaced freedom’s relevance altogether, in an age in which human existence seems inconceivable without viral media dependency, which therefore must be recognized as nothing less than a vital force—literally, a life link?”²⁰

I start by examining the VICE video’s relationship to critical scholarship on documentary, image politics, and encounter, elucidating the connections between the biopolitical valences of documentary immediacy on the one hand, and digital media’s

¹⁹ Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture* (Duke University Press, 2012); Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Duke University Press, 2017).

²⁰ Chow, *Entanglements*, 168.

entanglements with self-documentary practices on the other. Then, I place the VICE documentary within circulating scholarship on the state of digital media cultures. Here, I refute that the VICE video connects a cosmopolitan digital youth culture by attending to the ways digital spaces are imbued with cosmopolitical differences, alliances, and disjunctures. I further contend with how affect mediates VICE's approach to storytelling, utilizing critical interventions in postcolonial and decolonial image culture by scholars like Rey Chow and Merlyna Lim to argue that platforms' monetization of captivity compels and/or propels a circulating economy of visibilities and visceralities.²¹

I then turn to two case studies as a way to map the different articulations of "a world of VICE" that emerge from different nodes in VICE's media empire. I find that the recent uptick in social documentary acts as an embattled space for image justice, in which cosmopolitical visions must compete for visibility (and therefore, viability/vitality) in the proliferating field of commodified visibilities. In Indonesia, the VICE documentary acts as a site of creative friction within the space of encounter, in which documentary participates in a vexed terrain of image justice attached to cosmopolitical differences around nation, religion, political economy, etc. In Saudi Arabia, the VICE documentary puts a "human" face on Saudi culture, participating in a broader brand-building media strategy to shift focus away from human rights abuses in the kingdom. Across these spaces, I find that virality acts as a biopolitical mechanism of economic and cultural capital—the economization of captivity—which re-entrenches social media's power as a spectacle-driven space imbued

²¹ Chow, *Entanglements*. Merlyna Lim, "From Activist Media to Algorithmic Politics: The Internet, Social Media, and Civil Society in Southeast Asia," in *Routledge Handbook of Civil and Uncivil Society in Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2023); Merlyna Lim, "Algorithmic Enclaves: Affective Politics and Algorithms in the Neoliberal Social Media Landscape," in *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means*, ed. Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davies (New York: Routledge, 2021); Merlyna Lim, "The Politics and Perils of Dis/Connection in the Global South," *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 4 (2020): 618–25.

by affective performances of injustice and solidifies documentary and documentary tropes as the ground for performing justice or victimhood as part of a broader monetization of vulnerability/affectivity online.²²

Documentary Frictions

VICE Media's success was born out of its entanglements with the global. As I detail in chapter one, *Vice* magazine's success began in Montreal, but depended on transnational cultural and development trends that forwarded a branded approach to urban development by way of cultivating local creative capital and infrastructures. *Vice* magazine was also globally distributed, even though McInnes, Smith, and Alvi's claims of world domination at the time were speculative at best and manufactured at worst.²³ Riding the waves of internet investment bubbles, as illustrated in chapters one and two, VICE's Canadian founders moved to New York City. Their aspirations were always global—they aimed from the beginning to pursue "world domination," which included both the distributional reach of their magazine and then video content, but also their approach to visualizing the world. VICE's success in a global media ecology was built on its distributional outposts and brand recognition from the

²² Here, I am inspired by many political and cultural theorists who see the rise of identity politics as connected to political attachments to injury and wounding. For example, Wendy Brown critiques the rise of identity politics as part of a neoliberal economy of wounded populations, which distracts from the broader structural violences of global capitalist systems by tying suffering to social capital and virtue: "As liberal discourse converts political identity into essentialized private interest, disciplinary power converts interest into normativized social identity manageable by regulatory regimes." (59) See: Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," in *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton University Press, 1995), 52–76. See also: Lilie Chouliaraki, "Victimhood: The Affective Politics of Vulnerability," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (February 2021): 10–27.

²³ Later interviews and critical histories detail how their claims of having global distribution were mostly lies. They often just shipped copies of the free magazine to storefronts in places like London without gaining permission and claimed them as distribution spaces. See: Suroosh Alvi, Gavin McInnes, and Shane Smith, *The Vice Guide to Sex and Drugs and Rock And Roll* (New York: Warner Books, Inc, 2003).

magazine days²⁴, but it was also established through its globe-trotting encounters with and reporting on world events and cultures.

Additionally, VICE stood alone as the only digital-first news company in the broader “social news” wave that built its prestige on international reporting. Throughout VICE’s rise, flagship shows like VICE on HBO and Vice News Tonight built the VICE brand through their coverage of numerous global news stories and cultural phenomena, while VICE as a company also launched (and re-launched) dozens of bureaus in global creative capitals as part of their mission to become the authority on global youth culture. Ironically enough, VICE’s entanglements with the global are ultimately what both extended and ended its imperial reign—by the 2020’s, the company was notably struggling to scale quickly enough for their growing slate of investors and shareholders. They depended on their growing global bureaus and partnership deals with localized media companies to both subsidize their US operations and provide an in-flow of global stories (as well as distract from investors’ anxieties about future growth).²⁵

On a structural level, VICE’s global mediations are evidence of what Michael Curtin has described as the global shift of media industries and cultural texts. He contends that twenty-first century media texts, industries, and practices “are fundamentally global and scalable... they self-consciously scale and re-scale their operations as they imagine the shifting topographies of the content and services they offer.”²⁶ Drawing on Bhaskar Sarkar’s

²⁴ It should be noted that *Vice Magazine*’s popularity was primarily in Western, European, and highly Westernized creative capitals, like London, Tokyo, etc.

²⁵ A missed payment from a murkily defined global vendor, who had commissioned content from Vice World News, is reported to have triggered a cash crisis and the subsequent bankruptcy filing. See: Mark Stenberg, “How Vice Media Went Bankrupt,” *Adweek*, July 24, 2023.

²⁶ Michael Curtin, “Post Americana: Twenty-First Century Media Globalization,” *Media Industries Journal* 7, no. 1 (2020); Bhaskar Sarkar, “Plasticity and the Global,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 56, no. 2 (2015): 451-471.

articulation of “the plasticity of the global,” Curtin and Sarkar illustrate the complexities of global media production, power, aesthetics, and politics, in which the global fluidly morphs between topographies and emerges contingently via complex connections, disconnections, encounters, and feedback loops. As Sarkar notes, rather than pursue stale dialectical relations of dominance, subordination, and homogenization, today’s articulations of the global should be seen and studied as fundamentally plastic, wherein “the global-as-emergence results from the transitory and contingent connections between singular local nodes.”²⁷

A political economic reading would characterize VICE’s global mediations as part of a broader project to scale rapidly enough to soothe investors’ anxieties about VICE’s profitability. Similar to the empire building projects of Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch, the need to create “shareholder value” pressed the company to shapeshift to fit the plastic topographies of media institutions and power in various localities, regions, scales, and “scapes” while maintaining a “spectacular discourse” about the company’s global value.²⁸²⁹ On a fundamentally material level, creating a global distribution network was a necessity for VICE in an age of speculative finance capital, allowing VICE to cash in on multiple distribution windows while also using its global bureaus and headquarters as spaces from which it could source material and stories for its various regional channels.

Yet, a political economic view alone does not account for the textual resonances, discordances, or ambivalent identifications that make a particular media object or industry

²⁷ Sarkar, “Plasticity and the Global.”

²⁸ See Michael Curtin’s reading of Anna Tsing’s economy of appearances, in which “spectacular accumulation” acts as “a central factor in shaping the development and value of enterprises that operate at the leading edge of each new media innovation.” Curtin, “Post Americana,” 94-95.

²⁹ Along this line of analysis, there is an interesting overlap between WPP’s interests in national economies and youth markets, like in Indonesia, and VICE’s choices for the global headquarters and bureaus. Murdoch’s investment in VICE is also a clear driving factor; many of the deals VICE brokered with regional or national television companies for distribution had some connection to, or were directly owned by, Murdoch-owned enterprises.

take root; a contention of increased importance in a digitally mediated world in which many are saturated with a wide variety of media, particularly images. The proliferation of affective media images has also given rise to a growing global interest in popular documentary, which documentary stakeholders chalk up to an interest in truth, authenticity, and access to untold stories and distant worlds.³⁰ To start, I want to examine the VICE video's relationship to critical scholarship on documentary, image politics, and encounter, particularly by way of considering the interconnections between the biopolitical valences of documentary immediacy and scholarship on digital media's entanglements with self-documentary practices.

By the mid-2010's, VICE's signature documentary style emerged as a crystallized format in and of itself with increasingly global recognition as the VICE media empire expanded beyond its digital origins and across various global outposts. Its distinctive approach also traveled into the realm of popular culture, with two notable instances marking VICE's iconicity within popular culture in the mid-2010's. Ti West's found-footage cult film, *The Sacrament* (2015), follows two VICE reporters as they travel to a secluded cult to find their friend/co-worker's sister. Based visually and narratively on the infamous Jonestown massacre, the reporters attempt to interview cult members and the elusive leader, "Father," promising each of their interviewees that they are not aiming to exoticize their lifestyles, but rather trying to be "honestly subjective." In the end, the reporters' inside look into communal life is revealed to be an elaborate PR front. As some community members try to tell the VICE crew the truth about Eden Parish, the documentary premise is broken—the

³⁰ A telling example can be found in this Netflix-produced article: Maria Sherman, "Documentaries Are Booming — Here's Why We Can't Get Enough," *Tudum by Netflix*, March 1, 2022. <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/netflix-documentary-renaissance-kanye-west>.

VICE documentarians learn that their subjects were lying about and performing their happiness with communal life (compelled by Father's threats). This revelation shatters "Father's" curated vision, resulting in chaos and bloodshed.

Following a similar narrative track but switching to the mockumentary genre, comedians Bill Hader and Fred Armisen critically spoofed the VICE documentary in their *Documentary Now!* episode, "DRONEZ: The Search for El Chingon." In this satire of VICE's "ballz to the wallz" journo-documentary style, Armisen and Hader play three consecutive pairs of DRONEZ journalists searching for the fictional Mexican "cartel kingpin," El Chingon. Through these three iterations of the expendable/interchangeable hipster VICE journalist, we experience the ineptitude and naivete of VICE's immersionist aesthetic. By eschewing objectivity, the journalists prepare little to no research, and instead parachute in and narrate the unfolding events through an anthropological lens, warning viewers they may be "disturbed by the level of poverty they see" when entering a home likely larger and more well-appointed than their small Brooklyn apartments.

Throughout the episode, the hipster tourist-journalists' lack of cultural awareness about the risks and potential dangers of their presence results in their murder. Each time the pair is killed, the episode cuts back to Jamieson Friend, a stand-in for Shane Smith played by Jack Black, who nonchalantly dispatches the next pair of VICE hosts to continue the hunt for El Chingon. When the next duo—also played by Armisen and Hader—respawns, they seamlessly pick up where their predecessors left off, wearing different clothes and using different names, but otherwise indistinguishable from those who died before them. This ridiculous scenario satirizes the disposability, homogeneity, and extractivist view of VICE's

documentary encounters, wherein over privileged hipster millennials with little journalistic training are dropped into risky or dangerous locales in order to extract the story at all costs.

The journalists' naivete elides the objective, authoritative voice of many US documentaries and news coverage. In one scene, the VICE journalists perform their lack of training within the norms of journalistic and/or documentary tradition through a meeting with their foil, a fictional *New York Times* reporter, Jill Koch. This lack of training is what both opens the reporters up to danger and facilitates their encounters with various documentary subjects, who utilize the pair's lack of knowledge to perform their own subjectivities. For example, the first pair of VICE hosts visits the home of a man allegedly suffering from the violence of cartel rule. He tells the story of his son's disappearance, who he claims was taken by the cartel as retaliation for refusing to hide cartel property near his home. While the VICE reporters stage the stereotypical Westerner's orientation to the rest of the world by commenting on "the abject poverty" they're going to witness on-screen, the footage itself fails to deliver on this promise. Instead of listening to the man's story and calls for justice, the pair are more interested in their own reactions to the so-called abject living conditions around them, revealing the types of mistranslations and misrecognitions that happen at the site of encounter. Meanwhile, the interviewed subject sees their presence as an opportunity to visibilize his son's disappearance, hoping that giving an interview and providing a picture of his son to a Western audience may spark viewers to invest in helping locate children missing at the hands of the local cartel.

Similarly, the VICE hosts' final interview is the largest reversal of the documentary premise. The duo haphazardly finds El Chingon by wandering through the area in which he is reported to live and walking up "to the biggest house we could find." While the camera keeps

rolling through a tense exchange with El Chingon's bodyguards and the cartel head, it dissipates when the group recognizes the naivete of the reporters and consents to an interview. The pair are quickly distracted by the elaborate spectacle of what they see as the drug kingpin lifestyle, in which they are thrust into a glamorous and dangerous party of vice, including firing illegal guns, imbibing illicit substances, and rubbing elbows with the rich and powerful. While these antics have won over the VICE hosts, El Chingon hardly partakes and merely observes; by the end he has managed to distract the duo enough to evade ever participating in the interview, thereby subverting the documentary gaze aimed at capturing elusive subjects. Of course, all of this is for naught when the mansion is raided by a combination of the DEA and Mexican forces, which included Koch, the "embedded" reporter from earlier, who is irate that she had been scooped.

On the surface, the mockumentary is a clear indictment of the VICE ethos, in which undertrained and disposable millennial reporters are parachuted in to cover incredibly complex topics, often with a tendency of adopting a myopic glance that reinforces the supremacy of the United States and other Western nations. It is easy to be dismissive of Vice Media's exoticizing tendencies and radical posturing. A surface-level, or top-down reading of VICE's global contours sees its availability in 34-80 countries as a way of expanding its cultural cachet as well as a mode of value extraction by way of tapping emergent digital video and television markets for wider distribution and high-dollar global advertising deals. From this perspective, VICE's global expansion—funded by multi-million dollar deals with media giants like Viacom, A&E, and tech company TCV between 2013 and 2014—helped craft a brand image in which VICE functioned as a hub for a globalizing, cosmopolitan

network of young cultural documentarians.³¹ Yet, belying this surface reading is a deeper vexed tension: why does the VICE video resonate with a diverse array of global audiences, including those outside of predominantly Western nations? As evidenced by the awkward encounters in the VICE video's popular remediations, I find that the VICE videos stages and leans into what Anna Tsing has called the "frictions" produced at the site of encounter, in which the "messy and surprising features" that show "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" are foregrounded.³² Most importantly, by categorizing VICE's videos as documentaries, I want to explore the ways that documentary narratives, tropes, ethics, and aesthetics have traveled beyond their discursive or practical boundaries as video cultures expand globally to challenge, adapt, or reify their often colonial visual lineages and visualities.

These two popular remediations of the VICE video as documentary showcase the ways that all such encounters involve acts of friction by including and (often naively) emphasizing the weird and unexpected in cross-cultural encounters and pursuing in-depth portraits of liminal figures. The lack of overarching discourse and overt mastery narratives in the VICE video renders the text open despite the VICE host's attempt to convey one clear narrative—in the VICE video, the reporters instead are repeatedly duped, misled, used, and/or lied to in ways that showcase the artifice of documentary practice that aims to shed light on the truth. The creative friction involved in visibilizing "invisibilized" figures reveals a larger question: what does the global familiarity with, adoption of, and often subversion of

³¹ This political-economic stance is evidenced within the trade press coverage of VICE's global expansion, in which VICE content covering global youth culture could be repackaged and redistributed to other global outposts for further advertising revenues, syndication income, and brand deals, while the local VICE teams in bureaus throughout the world could "localize" the VICE brand while simultaneously feeding stories and content back to VICE's Brooklyn headquarters. See: Lucinda Southern, "How Vice Localizes Branded Content across Europe," *Digiday*, February 21, 2018.

³² Tsing, *Friction*, 1-3.

Western documentary practices by those who are often the subjects of such films do in terms of their “truth” claims?

Pooja Rangan takes up these critical questions in her investigation of the humanitarian genre of participatory documentary, in which, she claims that documentary is imbued with a visual and affective biopolitics.³³ Drawing on a wide range of theories representing human and non-human lives, she argues that “documentary, especially in its most benevolent, humanitarian guises, is thoroughly implicated in the work of regulating what does and does not count as human.”³⁴ In particular, she analyzes the ways that crisis documentarians—in offering to hand over the camera to those living through crisis—engage in a form of normative politics that compels documentary subjects to perform and embody their “bare liveness.”³⁵ Opposing Hardt and Negri’s enthusiasm for a globally connected communication atmosphere in which the dispossessed can communicate and visibilize their suffering, Rangan finds that performing visibility according to documentary tropes instead “reinforces the racist biopolitical rationale that fuels the spectacle of the humanitarian emergency.”³⁶ Using Foucault, Rangan proposes that the false promise of documentary immediacy reinforces a Western interventionist positionality, in which humanitarian emergencies compel action and intervention from their audiences. In this way, participating in visibilizing distant suffering does not act as a mode of political intervention in and of itself, but rather reinforces “the trap” of visual biopolitical project of normalizing controlling who is human (and thereby afforded rights) and who is not (and thereby allowed to die).³⁷

³³ Rangan, *Immediations*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁷ “... that within the architectonics of surveillance society, it is through the medium of light, not darkness, that control is enforced—as Foucault famously writes in *Discipline and Punish*, ‘visibility is a trap’” (Rangan, 101). See also Alexander Weheliye for how biopolitics participates in perpetuating racialized assemblages of

In other words, Rangan finds that the participatory impulse behind media that centers on humanitarian, crisis, or emergency issues perpetuates an interventionist view of the world and reifies a deeper history of visual biopolitics that has long plagued documentary and its entangled history with colonial rule and imperial expansion. Her intervention forwards a long-standing critique of liberal paradigms within documentary praxis from feminist postcolonial scholars, such as Fatimah Tobing Rony and Trinh T. Min-ha, who view documentary's intersections with human rights and social change as part of a broader visual biopolitics.³⁸ For these scholars, the act of documentation—or even the “gifting” of documentary power by handing over the camera to documentary subjects—does nothing to challenge existing social relations (such as entrenched binaries of nature-barbarism/culture-civilization), reinforces liberal paternalistic “benevolence,” and reasserts the need for (often Western) intervention.³⁹ While these scholars' interventions focus on documentary, their investment in the genre is due to a deeper commitment to understanding how these visual regimes are mobilized by various political fields steeped in “human rights” and therefore the articulation of humans and non-humans (e.g., child labor, animal rights, neurodivergent perspectives, etc.).⁴⁰

innocence-victim and deviant-perpetrator, as well as Jasbir Puar's powerful identification of “terrorist assemblages” as a biopolitical form of dehumanization. Alexander Ghedi Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

³⁸ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear, and the Lure of Authenticity,” in Trinh T. Min-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (Routledge, 1991); Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Duke University Press, 2017); Fatimah Tobing Rony, *How Do We Look?: Resisting Visual Biopolitics* (Duke University Press, 2022).

³⁹ Rangan writes: “At its core, *Immediations* argues that documentary, especially in its most benevolent, humanitarian guises, is thoroughly implicated in the work of regulating what does and does not count as human.” Rangan, *Immediations*, 8.

⁴⁰ In doing so, Rangan in particular charts her own “oblique” approach to documentary, which is invested in the ways documentary visibilities and ethics travel. See pg. 19.

Rangan's work maps an interdisciplinary, "oblique" approach to interrogating documentary ethics and visualities, forwarding an agenda of analyzing the "visual biopolitics" developed by postcolonial feminist scholars and Black feminist theorists.⁴¹ My investments in this research take a similar track; I am more interested in the ways VICE's immersionist documentary visualities move across and between global contexts rather than situating them within various documentary traditions. Although Rangan does not contend deeply with the ways that digital environments also provoke and circulate immediations, I want to transpose Rangan's insights to discuss the documentary impulses of digital ecologies and its imprints in the "immersionist" perspective of VICE documentaries.

Critical work on the proliferation of documentary images—particularly of distant suffering or political mobilization—on social media has raised significant questions about image politics in an age of image saturation. As a genre that often traffics in encounters with different or invisibilized people, cultures, or claims to power, documentary continues to operate in complex cultural terrain in a world awash with popular documentaries, digital activism, and self-documentary social media practices. While some scholars see the proliferation of smartphones and social media platforms as a new horizon for grassroots activism and social change, others question the role of proliferating affective images that often appear in decontextualized, spectacular spaces and become mobilized by vastly different publics.⁴² As explored in the last chapter, the affective nature of digital culture is

⁴¹ Fatimah Tobing Rony's *How Do We Look?* makes vital connections between the regimes of visibility in colonial archives and visualities discussed in postcolonial theories and the biopolitical regimes that consistently mark people of color—particularly Black communities—as ethnic, non-human, object, etc. See also: Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations." In Sylvia Wynter, *On Being: Human as Praxis*, edited by Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015): 7-89; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*.

⁴² This is evidenced by both a proliferating field dedicated to documenting the importance of social media for marginalized communities and a field of scholarship steeped in the colonial registers of shocking images.

steeped in a desire to make users *do something*. Whether it's to like, share, subscribe, repost, comment on, respond to, or otherwise circulate, social media platforms in particular privilege and reward content that makes us participate and engage with what we're seeing on our screens. VICE's "hybrid," immersionist aesthetic gestures toward a growing collapse between documentary (as an artistic field), social media-infused practices of witnessing and documentation, and acts of digital journalism.

In the following sections, I contend with VICE's media empire and immersive documentary style by placing these discursive formations within a broader context of viral media publics and critiques of documentary immediacy.⁴³ I start with first articulating the ways that YouTube's image economy works to stage the cosmopolitical frictions of global media industries and cultures today, which I argue works through a captivational logic of surfacing affective, visual spectacles. VICE also functions in this terrain by popularizing its immersive documentary praxis, which creates affectively compelling stories or visual spectacles through their attention to stories "from the edge." I attempt to answer: If we follow Rangan's call to investigate "the normalizing calculus that goes into defining the benchmarks of humanity in the liberal West, the complicity of documentary media in regulating these definitions, and the unevenly distributed costs of achieving these benchmarks,"⁴⁴ what do VICE's frictive surfaces display about the visual biopolitics of global documentary culture, which I find demands we perform authenticity and build community through visceral affinities? Said differently, how does VICE's goal to tell "the human side of every story"

⁴³ Often new technologies offer to get us "closer," create more empathy, but they still perpetuate a kind of visual tourism that is often devoid of focusing on clear, structural change. There was (and continues) to be a similar debate around the use of VR/immersive reality in news and documentary footage. See: Trinh, "The Mechanical Eye"; Lisa Nakamura, "Feeling Good about Feeling Bad: Virtuous Virtual Reality and the Automation of Racial Empathy," *Journal of Visual Culture* 19, no. 1 (April 1, 2020): 47–64; Eszter Zimanyi and Emma Ben Ayoun, "Introduction: Humanitarian Immersions," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 3 (2022): 154–160.

⁴⁴ Rangan, *Immediations*, 7–8.

both challenge norms of journalism and documentary (and their own embattled divisions) and provide a view into the frictions that animate affectively fraught articulations of the global, the local, the digital, and the political?

Captivating Cosmopolitics

There is a growing scholarship dedicated to thinking through the multiple scales and scopes of the question: “Is there a global digital culture?”⁴⁵ As referenced above, the complex entanglements of global media, cultures, and economies today have challenged previous critical frameworks for understanding global media power, such as domination/subordination, commercialization/resistance, cultural imperialism, and cultural hybridity. Bringing together theories of the global and persistent problems of the digital, global media scholars are increasingly concerned with rising affective, visceral (often nationalist) political movements and their entanglements with the often commercial and unregulated spaces of digital communication. Critical work in this area attends to the complexities of connectivities and disconnections enabled by digital infrastructures and various iterations of “the internet,” paying particular attention to “how the universal relates to the particular, the global to the local, the digital to the material, and the human to the posthuman.”⁴⁶ In other words, analyzing the global involves attending to what Rey Chow has described as entanglements, which involves looking closely at “the linkages and enmeshments that keep things apart; the voidings and uncoverings that hold things together.”⁴⁷ For Chow, entanglement facilitates and describes the odd alliances and deep

⁴⁵ Marwan Kraidy, “Convergence and Disjuncture in Global Digital Culture: An Introduction,” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017), 3808-3814.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Rey Chow, *Entanglements*, 12.

divisions that proliferate in our hypermediated worlds, in which modes of connection and friction forge the linkages between peoples, places, cultures, and aesthetics despite (and sometimes because of) the tensions of emplacement, displacement, and differing visions of the global and the cosmos. In other words, contending with the global in digital culture necessitates countering universalizing descriptions of digital cosmopolitanisms or totalizing perspectives like neoimperialism/neocolonialism in favor of thinking about the relationships between persistent local realities (evidenced recently by the rise of nationalist movements) and visions of the global (which are often inflected by the local and the particular).

In the case of VICE, VICE's vision for its media power seems to function in an odd space within these frameworks for global power dynamics. Establishing a media empire—along with Smith's overt desires for global cultural influence—is imbued with the imperialist aspirations of global media capital. Yet, Bodker's analysis, in which VICE represents the idealistic progressive politics of a global intellectual class, has placed outsized hopes for liberation or transformative change on the connective-collective power of digital documentation. As outlined in chapter two, VICE's digital storytelling approach was informed by the global activist publics who wielded digital recording technologies and co-opted the commercial spaces of digital platforms to contest institutional attempts to silence, distort, or discredit their claims. In this section, I want to continue this analysis by way of thinking through the affective valences of digital video cultures, which are both locally inflected by their relation to the many internets and globally connected by the proliferation of increasingly global digital spaces like YouTube.

YouTube has become a central node for analysis; the rise of entrenched nationalisms and populisms vex any claims to both utopic, cosmopolitan visions of a globally connected

world and fearful globalization discourse documenting cultural homogenization and domination. Instead, YouTube is a space for incredibly complex sites of encounter, identification, and performativities. For example, Michelle Cho's work on "pop cosmopolitics" carefully wades into this terrain by examining the global connections and disjunctures through the (often viral) circulations of K-pop media on a "global" space like YouTube.⁴⁸ Cho finds that "the performativity of video" on YouTube "frames and stages the multiple and contested worlds of the cosmopolitical."⁴⁹ In the acts of mimetic creativity inspired by encountering K-pop as a global-popular form, she sees video as the space for cosmopolitical performance, wherein the text itself both "serves as cultural branding" and "visualizes the very experiences of emplacement and displacement in the encounter with pop- culture texts" through its remediation across surrounding intertextual video cultures.⁵⁰ In other words, emergent global-popular objects like K-pop video cultures on YouTube stage—through multiple layers and levels—the cosmopolitical as the coexistence of multiple worldings that "spectacularize not a univocal cosmopolitan transcendence of cultural and geographic constraints, but rather the politics of emplacement, displacement, and encounter."⁵¹ In doing so, Cho challenges the totalizing liberal assumption of cosmopolitan discourses that finds a globally connected world in the space of social media platforms, although she remains critical of the ways that viral phenomena on YouTube incentivize global visibility and ubiquity at all costs. Because virality flattens the terms of engagement with a video, she finds that virality is stoked as much by entrenched, exoticizing consumption

⁴⁸ Michelle Cho, "Pop Cosmopolitics and K-Pop Video Culture," in Joshua Neves and Bhaskar Sarkar, eds., *Asian Video Cultures: In the Penumbra of the Global* (Duke University Press, 2017), 240–65.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 255.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

practices that perform reactivity and affectivity as it is by organic affinity with diverse media; she finds that viral videos often sacrifice intelligibility, specificity, and distinction in favor of garnering as much attention and engagement as possible, regardless of if that attention is negatively or positively coded.⁵²

As a platform that advertises its ability to circulate visual texts globally, YouTube is increasingly encountered as a space to seek out anti-mainstream news, information, and political performances. While Cho remains hopeful for the “cosmopolitical potential of [digitally mediated] popular culture,” there’s a central tension in her analysis that informs broader questions about contemporary global digital culture and postcolonial theory: what does visibility (with or without intelligibility) and ubiquity do in terms of politics?⁵³ How does depending on spaces like YouTube with opaque and often normative “algorithmic politics” for visibility mediate the performances of affinity, solidarity, and/or speech in general? And, moving from pop culture to documentary and witnessing, how do Rangan’s assertions about the biopolitics of immediations apply in digital spaces that compel performativity and reward visibility and ubiquity? To answer these questions, I find that we must first think about the ways that virality shape and are shaped by the deeper histories of visual biopolitics I unpack in the previous section.

Across various global contexts, crises of “fake news,” disinformation, and other forms of “bad” virality challenge entrenched hopes for commercial platforms’ democratizing functions. Virality plays a central role in surfacing these alternative visions for digital video. Virality—as a measure of a piece of content’s engagement or affectivity determined by

⁵² This argument also maps well onto Tsing’s arguments about the ways that the global and capital increasingly function as an “economy of appearances,” in which actors accrue value through spectacular accumulation. Tsing, *Friction*.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 243-4.

opaque factors—collapses differing affective entanglements with video. YouTube’s internal architecture sorts, ranks, and recommends content often based on popularity-driven algorithmic motives, which has been found to stoke populist rhetorical strategies and the fomentation of populist political networks.⁵⁴ Building on this work and Cho’s “pop cosmopolitics,” I offer that YouTube’s opaque algorithmic structures stoke an economy for *cosmopopulisms*, which describes the world-building efforts of various online communities, as well as informs the branded, populist approach many YouTube microcelebrities take to build these digital worlds.⁵⁵ In the case of viral documentaries, YouTube’s cosmopolitanism is explicitly troubling for assessing documentary value. Often, virality functions as a stand-in for democratic procedures like voting; yet this view negates the fact that virality is mediated by the commercial motives of the platform itself (which, for YouTube, rewards conformity and simplistic narratives) and further internalizes a capitalistic view on politics (whatever sells has to be the best for society). VICE’s global popularity can also be examined through this lens: what does VICE’s attachment to viral videos and dependence on visibility and ubiquity over intelligibility and distinction do for global visual economies?

As discussed above, documentary’s historical ties to ethnography and anthropology connects the humanitarian documentary impulse with the drive to “visibilize” or “give voice” to silenced or invisible others. VICE’s penchant for visibilizing a “world of VICE”—a term

⁵⁴ See, for example, Rebecca Lewis, “‘This Is What the News Won’t Show You’: YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-Celebrity,” *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 201–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419879919>.

⁵⁵ Cho also lands on populist logics in a keynote address given at University of Colorado, Boulder. Here, she describes: “fandom as a particular form of populism in two, somewhat opposed senses, first, in fandom’s assertions of a visual and affective commons and its gift economy and, second, in the resemblance between the affective excesses of fandom and those of the mass or the crowd. If contemporary geopolitics are defined by the rise of various populisms, as many have argued, I propose that media fandoms such as those that have fueled K-pop’s crossover success be understood as part of this zeitgeist.” Michelle Cho, “The Cosmo-Logics of K-Pop: Media Intimacies and Populist Soft Power,” YouTube, CU Boulder Center for Asian Studies, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCEDQ7RrQPc>.

that literally traffics in immorality or criminality—discursively ties VICE as a brand to the humanitarian impulse of bringing shadow spaces, communities, or ideas to light. Returning to Bodker’s description of VICE’s distinctly digital aesthetic, the VICE documentary excels at tapping into and aestheticizing the perceived authenticity of social media documentary images. As part of their “immersionist” approach, VICE documentaries typically juxtapose close-up, “unmediated” experiences of global news stories while intercutting user-generated images to index the authenticity and urgency of their documentary work. They also consistently focus on singular personalities, zooming in on the “human stories” of global news events, such as crisis and war, with minimal context or overt point of view. What’s centered is humanity—the affective reactions of VICE guides as they navigate (or conjure) dangerous terrain and the affective performances of documentary subjects, who act as our sole source of information about their often justice-based claims.

The popularity of VICE videos demonstrates the entrenched cultural investment in what Trinh has termed “liberal documentary representation,” which seeks to justify the political importance of documentary production (and, as their primary distributor, social media platforms) through its moral promise to create better, more authentic images.⁵⁶ Digital spaces have only encouraged the proliferation of documentary testimonies and desires for visibility and inclusion.⁵⁷ Yet, this approach that justifies the means of circulating images of suffering or exclusion as an act of “bringing to light” has long been criticized by

⁵⁶ For Trinh, this is “the lure of authenticity,” that creates the trap of documentary visibility. It reifies the power of image-making and its attachments to Western epistemologies/scientific documentation. To be heard, one has to be seen; to be seen means to be imaged by Western science. Trinh, “The Mechanical Eye.”

⁵⁷ Aguayo makes this case, drawing connections between documentary’s connection to activist publics to the work of everyday witnesses to violence, such as the documenting of police brutality against Black people. Aguayo, *Documentary Resistance*, 227-240.

marginalized people, whose images and subjectivities tend to only be circulated and documented when they are experiencing or resisting explicit violence.⁵⁸

Scholarship on digital politics today has identified various viral economies that shape and are shaped by a rise in what Merlyna Lim has called “tribal nationalism” in political mobilization, in which spectacular images of violence or victimization circulate as a way to create unity through polarized exclusion and identification of a common enemy.⁵⁹

Documentary impulses and popular documentaries are at the center of this—for example, Lilie Chouliaraki’s work has always been critical of documentary and televisual practices like witnessing for the ways they often mobilized by commercial media to create a spectacle-driven “aestheticization of suffering.”⁶⁰ These spectacles often traffic in visual regimes of either crisis and intervention or brutality and suffering outside of the West in order to solidify affective economies of grief, horror, or ambivalence towards distant others.⁶¹ Her recent work demonstrates the dependencies between digital platforms and performances of vulnerability.⁶² She writes that, while empowering to some marginalized communities, overall “the algorithmic logic of platforms... maximizes the visibility of any claim to

⁵⁸ While there is significant investment in the documentation of state violence—such as the vital evidence of police brutality shown in bystander witness videos—there is a tendency to only have these images circulate rather than those of Black joy and subjectivity (and primarily to convince skeptical-racist publics who need visual evidence of police brutality to believe it). Historical arguments also debunk the idea that these images are vital for justice, citing that racism’s historical imbrication with the racial hierarchies within capitalism often function by assigning different levels of “human.” Black feminist theorists draw our attention to the ways that documents (photographs) of lynchings did not mobilize people against the brutality of white supremacists; rather, they circulated as commodities. See: Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus* and Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe” on the central role of racism in biopolitics-necropolitics.

⁵⁹ Lim, “From Activist Media to Algorithmic Politics.”

⁶⁰ Lilie Chouliaraki, “The Aestheticization of Suffering on Television,” *Visual Communication* 5, no. 3 (2006): 261–85.

⁶¹ Her earlier work draws on Mary Anne Doane’s critical reading of the temporalities of US television news, which she finds must invent liveness (and their authority to report and inform) out of producing endless spectacles of crisis and catastrophe. See: Chouliaraki, “The Aestheticization of Suffering” and Mary Ann Doane’s canonical work: Mary Ann Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990): 222–239.

⁶² Lilie Chouliaraki, “Victimhood: The Affective Politics of Vulnerability,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (February 2021): 10–27.

vulnerability to monetize user engagement.”⁶³ In particular she finds that digital platforms’ asynchronicity and lack of contextuality give way to the proliferation of multiple competing claims, in which virality “tends to amplify already popular claims to suffering without asking questions about who makes them or in which contexts of violence or vulnerability they appear.”⁶⁴

Viral videos thus draw on these deeper entanglements of power, visibility, surveillance, and spectacularization; today, images of suffering and vulnerability circulate in an affective economy in which competing affective claims vie for power in increasingly polarized ways. The quantification of affect via virality ties the assessment of these claims to whatever affects viewers the most, which collapses all kinds of intensive feelings into numbers of views, likes, responses, and shares (often opaquely defined). VICE’s imbrication with documentary is parasitical and normalizing in this sphere—VICE documentaries are viral because they circulate intensity and provide little contextual information that may challenge how far the video may spread. Smith and fellow co-founder Suroosh Alvi have even publicly stated that VICE videos are valuable because of their affective footage, which can be re-edited and recut to fit various geopolitical contexts along their distribution networks.⁶⁵ Thus, VICE’s media empire functions literally by accumulating spectacles in an economy of appearances.⁶⁶

⁶³ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Journalists have long questioned how VICE documentaries may travel to spaces like China, Russia, etc. Their response has generally been that they will recut their documentaries to fit local tastes and politics. See for example: “MBC Group, Vice Media Announce Exclusive Content Partnership,” *Arab News*, January 25, 2023.

⁶⁶ Here, I’m referring back to Tsing’s vital intervention into the dynamics of speculative, global capital today, in which she says companies (as well as political parties, parties, and nations) must conjure their value (capital) through spectacular performance (spectacular accumulation); the economy—detached from material reality—functions as an economy of appearances. Tsing, *Friction*.

The cultural internalization and monetization of visibility politics is at the center of these entrenched battles around victimhood, vulnerability, virality, and affective power in digital spaces. Contending with today's "postcolonial visibilities," Rey Chow argues that the legacy of postcolonial and liberation struggles of the 1960s is that resistant or radical publics center the media frame as "the actual, omnipresent political battleground" for social movements, which perpetuates further investment in image justice—being seen and imaged "properly" is akin to winning political power.⁶⁷ Using Marx, she describes the ways that this battle for visibility—which has always been mediated by the political and economic dynamics of media as producers of commodity spectacles—has given way to a world in which "the most precious truths about human life, such as people's identities and histories, and their agency, will need to compete for legitimacy as commodities, as visibilities."⁶⁸ The seemingly democratic spaces of social media platforms amplify these battles, in which activist and resistant publics vie for attention and affective weight in increasingly noisy media environments.⁶⁹ Chow is concerned about how this trajectory maps onto political organizing in an age of social media-driven politics. She finds that the temporal and contextual collapse of social media spaces and their embroiled image politics spark vital questions for postcolonial media studies, in which resistant groups both contest the proliferation of commercial surveillance systems (social media) and depend on them to reach people:

Should the users of these minuscule screens be described as subjects of confinement in the Foucauldian sense (in that the atomized screens, in being

⁶⁷ Chow, *Entanglements*, 161.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

used, are de facto surveillance embodied, by none other than the persons using them as “cool” gadgets)? How does the existence of channels of communication such as YouTube, together with the entry and exit possibilities they inject into everyday life (from postings of video vigilantism to movie premieres and amateurish performances), complicate and transform the notion of freedom? *Or, has the ubiquity of such commodified visibilities replaced freedom’s relevance altogether, in an age in which human existence seems inconceivable without viral media dependency, which therefore must be recognized as nothing less than a vital force—literally, a life link?* Finally, to return to the other term we invoked with capture: Is redemption or restitution now simply a matter of technological recyclability? (emphasis added)⁷⁰

While Chow doesn’t quite offer a firm answer to the questions she raises, a heuristic she introduces in an essay on the indistinction of art and non-art offers a different modality for thinking through the complexities of being inundated by commodified visibilities and viral economies. Foucault’s arguments about visibility and discipline are often cited in work thinking critically about visibility politics, and scholars like Rangan find theoretical strength in Foucault’s proposition that “visibility is a trap.”⁷¹ In an essay “On Captivation,” Chow introduces the idea of captivation as a different view on capture and the trap, which tends to privilege the artistry and domination of the captor rather than consider the subjective experience and agency of the captured or prey, whose capture is not always inevitable.⁷² She intervenes in the work that “the trap” does in art and literature, which can be transposed into

⁷⁰ Ibid., 168.

⁷¹ Here, drawing on Foucault’s infamous Panopticon example, visibility acts as a mode of biopolitical management, in which to be seen is to be caught in the trap of disciplinary power.

⁷² Chow, *Entanglements*, 31-58.

a rereading of Foucault's infamous "visibility is a trap" thesis. Using a critical analysis of *Madame Bovary* and Jacques Rancière's reading of its connections to politics and the sensible, she argues that captivation "is the deranged remainder that is unassimilable to the metanarratives of freedom that underlie both capitalist consumerism (in which a supposedly autonomous subject makes choices from an endless proliferation of material goods) and socialist revolution (in which a supposedly autonomous subject emancipates herself from the constraints imposed by class, race, colonialism, gender, and so forth)."⁷³ While entangled within these two opposing discourses, Chow finds that captivation allows us to avoid reading political or artistic movements as integrations into one of these two metanarratives by directing our attention to "disjunction, encounter, and interrogation," which she finds is of "insistently ontological import."⁷⁴

Captivation as the "something more" in the experience of capture, not of subjection to or domination by, but accounting for the agential experience of those entangled within competing metanarratives, is a heuristic that responds to Cho's desire to read the differing levels and layers of cosmopolitics within the universe of viral K-pop video culture. K-pop—and as I'm extending her work here, VICE—acts as a globally circulating phenomenon that captivates, both as an act of economic capture and as the production of various communities. Captivation stages these various disjunctures, encounters, and interrogations that characterize the "deranged remainder," representing both freedom from national constraints and capture by commercial media institutions (e.g., the music industry, global commercial pop, YouTube, etc.). In this sense, captivation can circumvent the "mastery"/domination nature of capture by

⁷³ Ibid., 52.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

rewiring the trap to its own advantage. Captivation both signals a sense of arrest, but also the presence of a lure.

As a mode of image capture often motivated by the lure of captivating figures, VICE's documentaries demonstrate the ways that captivation can be used to subvert, reroute, or redirect the trap to make the captured's own agency and knowledges about the trap known. VICE functions well in the captivation-driven spaces of social media by focusing on captivating figures, places, oddities, etc. Yet, Chow questions "whose captivation counts," particularly when it comes to assessing artistic (or, on YouTube, affective) value.⁷⁵ Of course, what is captivating for VICE takes on a Western bent, but the sight-based entanglements of capture and captivation at the site of encounter also pry open the documentary act as one in which the captured's response to the trap cannot be taken for granted. By approaching the documentary subject as a captivating object, in fact VICE slides between hunter and prey—the VICE crew both "captures" the scene by way of media capture but are also captivated themselves in the process. In centering their own captivation and receptivity, many of their documentaries are overtaken by the captivating figures themselves, not by the VICE hosts who, in fact, appear as naive prey in many cases.⁷⁶

Thus, "a world of VICE" plays in the terrain of captivation. For VICE viewers, the captivation of VICE's texts is open. Some are captivated by the actions of the VICE journalists/hosts as they enter into dangerously coded destinations. Others are captivated by the subversive or creative actions of figures living in the liminal spaces of society. Others yet

⁷⁵ Ibid. 57.

⁷⁶ We see this in the multiple times that VICE videos have been criticized as acts of covert propaganda, led by the documentary subjects. The "embedded reporting" that was performed at the behest of ISIS's Media team in "The Islamic State" shows how one can read that VICE was captured by a well-laid trap by ISIS media strategists, playing on Western captivations with terrorist brutality.

may be captivated by other rogue pieces in the assemblage of spectacular images that constitute the VICE's immersive, visceral visuality and aesthetic. The representation of captivation via the number of views, likes, and comments fails to represent these aspects of these relationships; it just remediates numbers as stand-ins for "objective" cultural value. The biopolitics of captivation in an age of viral media creates a performative injunction for those seeking political agency and power to perform their politics through the proliferation of captivating spectacles. In other words, video culture (as facilitated by the commercial architectures of social media) and the paratexts that shape their slippery surfaces stage and re-stage the complex and layered mediations of cosmopolitics, which in documentary media often takes the form of captivating performances of visceral politics as a mode of cosmopolitanism.

For example, VICE's most viral videos center on either the captivating pleasures of encountering exoticized others or on visibilizing captivating figures at the margins of global and national societies. While I unpack the broader Indonesian context in the next section, VICE's *Indonesia Riot!* video series—produced in collaboration with local journalists and creatives that make up the hip, creative youth cultures in Jakarta—offers some insights into the cosmopolitical layers and performances in VICE's digital documentaries. The first installment of the series is called "Royal Blood: Inside Indonesia's Lavish, Bloody Funeral Ceremonies," but the title card on the video's thumbnail reads, "Royal Blood: Money, Blood, and Death in Toraja."⁷⁷ The video explores the elaborate and expensive funeral rituals performed by Torajans in the South Sulawesi province, who purchase and sacrifice water buffaloes as part of the ceremony. The viewer follows along with an English-speaking,

⁷⁷ VICE, "Royal Blood: Inside Indonesia's Lavish, Bloody Funeral Ceremonies," VICE Video, March 7, 2017.

assumedly Jakartan, VICE Indonesia host as she documents and narrates the preparations and customs of one family preparing for the funeral. The video leads with VICE's signature sizzle reel style, showcasing a visual spectacle of ritual sacrifice that oscillates between interviews with Torajans, cell phone footage of the bloody ordeal of sacrifice, and aestheticized images of children holding fireworks as they run through the jungle. While host Aria Danaparamita introduces the practice as an ancient ritual of the Christian-indigenous religion, Alluk Todoru, she also gestures toward the other themes of the documentary—that migration and an influx of money from gold and copper mining in neighboring Papua has changed the ritual, which now acts as a symbolic display of wealth and status on par with the scale of grandiosity formerly reserved for royals.

The slippage between the various titles and the tension between a story on migration and an exoticized representation of ritual sacrifice demonstrate the cosmopolitical frictions that pull at the seams of the text. One title draws on Western colonial desires to encounter “primitive” practices of animal sacrifice and lets these images stand in for the nation of Indonesia as a whole despite its partial view. The other draws attention to the specificity of a persistent practice of cultural tradition in the face of a modernizing urban national identity, while attending to the ways that capitalist flows of resources and money affect and reshape such traditions. The comments section also stages the connective aspirations and entrenched ethno-religious divisions in Indonesia, with many comments from self-identified Indonesian viewers praising the documentary for its celebration of Indonesia's cultural and tribal diversity. As Merlyna Lim has detailed, Indonesian political media is incredibly complex and divisive today; the (predominantly Muslim) state attempts to maintain and govern a multicultural national identity that is steeped in the traveling cosmopolitan rhetoric of

Western/liberal capitalist societies while effacing entrenched extractive hierarchies, religious tensions, and histories of dispossession within this broader vision.⁷⁸ Toraja plays into these tensions—the Torajan people historically aligned themselves with the Dutch colonial state seeking protection from Islamic separatists, with many converting to Christianity while maintaining many of their Alluk cultural traditions. Today, Toraja is a place for cultural tourism, both within Indonesia and for Westerners interested in consuming different cultural traditions around death. Within the documentary itself, it is clear that tourism is not a viable industry for Torajans to make a living where they are—many instead migrate to neighboring Papua to generate wealth for families back home, causing further tensions between often-denigrated and policed Papuans and the rest of the Indonesian archipelago.

For Lim, these complex entanglements between Western imperial legacies, entrenched national politics, and the internet have paved the way for social media to become the primary space for contesting and conjuring different articulations of Indonesia and the global. She maps the ways that “activist media” have developed alongside broader governmental, regional, and technological changes.⁷⁹ Detached from institutionally authorized views, Lim argues that “activist media” have now become embroiled with “algorithmic politics,” in which the commercial incentives of social media platforms have paved the way for a rise in “tribal nationalisms” and polarized, divisive “algorithmic enclaves” online.⁸⁰ Within their self-selected algorithmic publics, she argues that “social media users claim and legitimize their own versions of nationalism by excluding equality and justice for others. With such dynamics, the utilization of social media as a political tool in

⁷⁸ Merlyna Lim, “Freedom to Hate: Social Media, Algorithmic Enclaves, and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia,” *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 411-427.

⁷⁹ Lim, “From Activist Media to Algorithmic Politics.”

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

electoral campaigns further deepens divisions among social groups in society and amplifies animosity and intolerance against each other.”⁸¹ Her multiple studies of Indonesian and Southeast Asian digital politics have demonstrated the ways that political candidates and activist groups circulate dogmatic, binary, simplified political brands as a way of shoring up affective resonance and group cohesion by way of conjuring collective enemies and labeling/bullying any challengers. She argues that viral justice campaigns—while simulating change by way their virality and circulating affectivity—often distract from structural change because of their myopic focus on individual, affective events.⁸²

Taking this a step further, virality itself is often a normalizing/disciplinary process enacted by the desires for social media platforms to create environments primed for consumption. Research on the affective architectures of spaces like YouTube and TikTok have demonstrated the ways that algorithmic priorities shape what experiences of captivation rise to the surface and become viral. Creators working to raise their own visibility often engage in “algorithmic folklore,” in which they shift the performances of their identities and personas to match those already going viral as a response to the opaque governing structure of algorithmic opacity.⁸³ This often results in the standardization of performances in an economy of visibility, in which algorithm scholar Sophie Bishop argues are mediated by the commercial interests of advertisers, who desire to sort users into identifiable genres, communities, and identities in order to better target products, advertisements, and market

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² For example, she tracks the different political binaries that rose out the circulation of Prita Mulyasari as a was victim to Indonesia’s strict defamation and blasphemy laws, as well as the divisive #MaryJane campaign that sparked divisive outrage between Filipino and Indonesian social media users. Yet, she argues that, while these movements mobilized various publics, they did little to question structural or legal issues that facilitated their virality. Ibid., 38-39.

⁸³ Sophie Bishop, “Anxiety, Panic and Self-Optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube Algorithm,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 1 (February 2018): 69–84.

research for the production and circulation of more commodities.⁸⁴ Virality in this context acts as a vital force and life link—if you’re not getting views, then what captivational value does your performance have?—and as a mode of biopolitical management via its invisibilized structure of captivation production and management.

On a broader level, virality acts as a way that digital platforms attempt to capture captivation itself as a mode of value extraction, as well as to standardize the affective exchanges that happen to prime environments for further consumption. In other words, social media platforms like YouTube benefit from the circulation of viral content and the networks of reactions that they produce because virality itself—especially in regard to political media—centralizes their vital role in global communication networks and social politics. They act as the mediating space for competing visions, which are often incentivized toward intensive or engaging content that doesn’t bore the viewer too much nuance, context, or details. As Bishop has shown, YouTube in particular is skilled at creating homogenous publics in which similar content circulates readily, entangling that public with the communities and texts found on YouTube.⁸⁵ In the sense of documentary images that circulate across and between the commercial spaces of social media platforms, the aim is to garner political power and visibility not through devising compelling traps or hunting for prey, but rather through connections made via affectively resonant captivations. Power and politics in an age of virality thus accumulates not through the effective capture or domination of political consciousness or a visual field, but rather on building affective attachments that capitalize on captivation.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

A (bio)politics of captivation thus aptly describes the affective states that guide digital politics online, which traffic not in any rational or filial ideological interpellation, but rather present an anarchical space that allows users to become and lose themselves in what captivates them and confirms their algorithm-inflected identities. The platform itself is the ultimate “trap”—the digital architectures after all are designed to entrap the user’s attention and modes of social connection, information pursuits, and/or modes of self- and world-discovery—but it is one that renders incredibly visible the volatile/anarchic politics and constellations of power that arise through the letting loose of captivation. In order to understand how digital communicative infrastructures differentially enact biopolitical regimes of visibility, virality, and vitality, I turn to two nodes in VICE’s digital empire. I first return to VICE Indonesia to assess the VICE documentary’s role in a field of cosmopolitical (and cosmopopulist) tension. I then turn to Saudi Arabia by way of Riyadh to examine the world-making role documentaries can play in a broader geopolitical landscape of monetized captivation.

Indonesia Riot!

VICE’s first episode on its flagship HBO series on Indonesia was steeped in the remediation of an already viral moment.⁸⁶ In the early 2010’s, a video of a chubby toddler smoking cigarettes went viral on YouTube and across social media networks, resulting in numerous articles in the popular press and a 20/20 expose on child smokers in Indonesia in 2011. VICE’s episode rode this wave of virality by dedicating a 15-minute segment to their own work on child smoking in Indonesia, which showed hipster Thomas Morten traveling to

⁸⁶ *VICE*, season 1, episode 7, “Addiction,” aired May 17, 2013.

Indonesia (exact location undisclosed) to chat with children and experts about the smoking problem. Alongside interviewing smoking teens and children, their parents, and local health officials, Morton immerses himself in the culture by undergoing an alternative medical treatment to cure his acne with *kretek*, a type of clove cigarette. He chats with patients undergoing similar treatments at the facility, but the overarching narration remains skeptical about the entire endeavor; instead of displaying this encounter through a more nuanced understanding of differing cosmologies, we watch Morton react viscerally to the various treatment methods, indexing the backwardness of the experience by Western standards and tastes.

On the surface, the piece traffics in colonialist tropes, showing children who smoke to “relieve stress,” generally exoticizing a widespread tobacco problem as culturally backward, and pointing out the treatment’s hypocrisies without proper contextualization or historicization about ceremonial use of tobacco and *kretek* locally. In this myopic view, the surface of the documentary seems to remediate representational regimes that present a unified nation of “Indonesia” and represent Indonesians to Western viewers as out of step with global health initiatives. This is intentional, as evidenced by the sense of “absurdity” and backwardness promised in Smith’s opening monologue. What’s obviously missing from the visual language of the film is footage of Indonesia’s highly urbanized and modernized architectures, like those in Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, etc. Instead, the camera focuses on scenes that connote poverty and underdevelopment in order to reinforce Orientalist tropes within the text’s broader positionality. This omission sits in tension with the included interviews with Indonesian experts and medical professionals, who type on Macbooks and occupy office spaces remarkably similar to those found in major cities around the globe.

Although these tensions attempt to unravel the “subjectively honest” Western gaze, Smith’s introduction to the region clearly marks that this footage was shot and cut for an uninformed Western viewer, utilizing tropes of Western progress and non-Western “backwardness” to solidify this discursive framing.⁸⁷

Yet, the story that haunts the edges of the documentary is a story about the extractive and exploitative practices of global capital epitomized by global tobacco brands like Philip Morris International. While the opening segment delivers on shock for a Western audience, this footage is used as an entryway to critique the practices of transnational corporations like Philip Morris, who utilize cultural and economic ties to tobacco, along with the coexisting regulated and unregulated businesses within Jakarta, to find new profit horizons. The video includes interviews with a former Vice President for Philip Morris International, who described the deleterious effects of US regulation on the tobacco industry and the company’s subsequent “creative” moves into international markets, where demand was “skyrocketing.” Scholarship on public health in Jakarta and the tensions between heavy regulation in a cosmopolitan (and strict) urban population and those on the margins, such as the poor and various indigenous populations, have described it as a debate between “public health evolutionism and commodity nationalism.”⁸⁸ In this battle, those opposed to increased regulation on tobacco use depict attempts to control tobacco as “a neocolonial plot to destroy an indigenous industry that benefits small farmers, factory workers, and home industries.”⁸⁹ This position articulates a vexed relationship with colonial regimes of control and regulation

⁸⁷ The two other episodes dedicated to Indonesian culture and politics on VICE’s HBO series focused equally myopically on small aspects of Indonesian culture: Jihadism and forest decimation.

⁸⁸ Marina Welker, “Indonesia’s Cigarette Culture Wars: Contesting Tobacco Regulations in the Postcolony,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 63, no. 4 (October 2021): 911–47.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

but also obscures that only a few foreign-owned companies own a majority of the industry, which is increasingly automating tobacco production processes and slashing employment.

Despite its clearly colonialist tropes on the surface, yet again, the video provides an opening into different constructions of global culture and economies. These various affiliations and interpretations to the video itself are also shown in the comments section. Conducted primarily in English, the comments range from Western viewers expressing gratitude for having quit smoking to those reiterating the exoticizing gaze that locates Indonesia as culturally “behind” places like the United States.⁹⁰ Most interestingly, there are also a number of Indonesians speaking back to this problematic portrayal. One claimed that the video represented “a great effort to expose the smoking problem in my country and I wish more people from my country could have properly addressed it. And not by some western media...” Another expanded these tensions further to state:

Indonesian here and despite the release date of this video being in 2014, cigarette use has actually been restricted for some years now. Pictures of cancerous lungs, destroyed teeth etc has been on the packs for a few years. Smoking bans in most office buildings, schools and malls. Buying cigs at the mall or at supermarkets are also restricted to those over 18. The problem is the "warung", the small stalls people set up (like the one in this video where the kid bought his cigarette from), supermarkets in rural or low ses neighbourhoods that disregard the ban and keep on selling the stuff to the underage kids. The irony is that most of those from lower ses are the ones who

⁹⁰ Many comments focused on the experience of VICE host Thomas Morten, such as: “Poor Thomas. He always gets assignments that are mostly fucked up :D”

spend the most on cigarettes, despite having less income and health care support. It's gotten so bad that it's really just pointless to try.

In the comments section and the video itself, various affiliations and modes of interpretation emerge and coexist, staging the cosmopolitical frictions inherent in YouTube and the media that attains visibility on its surfaces. In the encounter between East and West staged by the VICE host's immersion, some viewers see cultural difference through Orientalist frames while others find connection across the shady manipulations of global capital via Philip Morris International. For Indonesians, the comments oscillate between "rescuing" the image of Indonesia by calling out the distorted view VICE presents in the documentary and expressing gratitude that the issues around smoking cultures and neocolonial incursion via global capital is being raised at all. These tensions—between East and West, between urban modernists and the poor and various marginalized castes outside of the metropolitan core—demonstrate the productive frictions and divisive entanglements that inform differing articulations of postcolonial identities and cosmologies in digital culture.

As described above, Indonesian media and culture has historically occupied a politically vexed space, in which waves of imperial rule have created political hierarchies, and varying articulations of the Indonesian nation and future have animated significant tension across the nation's various religious, cultural, linguistic, spatial, and socioeconomic divisions. Indonesia is also home to the largest (and one of the most technologized) youth populations in the world, which has come about through Indonesia's aspirations and accomplishments as part of the "global" economy of creative and technological capital. As discussed by Patricia R. Zimmerman in her chapter, "EngageMedia: The Gado Gado Tactics of Indonesia's New Social Media," Indonesian media commercialized in the development

focused post-Reformasi era, yet still remain concentrated in the hands of twelve major media groups who control the majority of the television stations, radio stations, and newspapers in the country.⁹¹ The proliferation of smartphones thanks to the robust (yet heavily resource-extractive) economy has led to a widespread adoption of the internet as a space for political rights claims, with spaces like EngageMedia acting as liminal spaces between commercial media and independent websites, blogs, and social media celebrities.

Zimmerman once again draws our attention to the double-bind of digitally mediated documentary practices. On the one hand, self-produced images can make space for evidencing human rights abuses and produce heated debate around political rights claims. On the other, they can also open up those who challenge the curated/branded image of Indonesia (both activists and nationalists alike) to surveillance and retaliation at the hands of a punitive legal system, as well as value extraction at the hands of commercial media who may recirculate images without proper context. Taking documentary studies outside of the contained spaces of film production, distribution, and circulation and asking how these tropes inform the political spaces of global digital cultures, Lim and Zimmerman alike are asking: what do rights-based self-documentary practices—or social media immediations if we borrow from Rangan—do in the age of ubiquitous images? As Zimmerman argues: “With its discourse of democratization of the means of production and the idealism of circulatory networks, proliferation of access to media technologies raises ethical questions about the rights of those represented and remixed.”⁹²

⁹¹ Patricia R. Zimmermann, “Engagemedia: The Gado Gado Tactics of New Social Media in Indonesia,” in Joshua Neves and Bhaskar Sarkar, eds., *Asian Video Cultures: In the Penumbra of the Global* (Duke University Press, 2017), 54–71.

⁹² Ibid., 64.

Despite these problematic visualizations of life in Indonesia, VICE launched a Jakarta-based VICE hub in 2016, which “aimed at wooing the country’s growing millennial and Gen Z demographic, estimated at more than 100 million people.”⁹³ Partnering with Jawa Pos TV and Google, VICE’s Jakarta bureau aimed to both build a global audience for VICE’s US-produced content and empower Jakartan creatives and journalists to produce locally-focused content in the VICE style. As VICE’s financial well-being crumbled, many of its efforts to launch bureaus in spaces like Jakarta were rolled back or abandoned, which seemed to provide both some struggles for those who continued to operate VICE bureaus and some agency to pursue different kinds of stories in the absence of direct oversight and hands-on editorializing. According to an interview with VICE Indonesia managing editor, Ardyan M Erlangga, in 2022, at first the outlet covered “exoticized” topics before slowly shifting toward making more human rights and social justice-oriented content.⁹⁴

The evidence of the imposed exoticized frame can be found in the *Indonesia Riot!* series, which is available via VICE’s website and YouTube page. In these videos, the tensions of Indonesian identities become more readily apparent. As evidenced by the analysis in the previous section, while the VICE hosts still narrate to the camera in English, they are more attentive to the specificities of indigenous tribes and smaller factions, thereby visibilizing the tensions of cohesive national identity. Still, the VICE hosts adopt and adapt the tropes of anthropological documentary, traveling from the unmarked “modernity” of Jakartan urban capitalism to communities living on the edges of and in contestation to a modern, neoliberal Indonesian cultural identity.

⁹³ Darah Hansen, “Vice Courts Indonesia’s Youth through Asian Expansion,” *Realscreen*, November 8, 2016.

⁹⁴ Tito Ambyo, “Talking Indonesia: Digital Journalism - Indonesia at Melbourne,” The University of Melbourne, July 7, 2022.

These frictions are also evident on the VICE Indonesia YouTube page, in which one is faced with another cosmopolitical vision of Indonesia, Asia, and the world. These videos are primarily conducted in Indonesian languages, like Bahasa Indonesian and Javanese, without English subtitles overlaid in the videos themselves. One can use the built-in Google tools that produce automatic captioning (although these tools are also opaque in their linguistic politics) to translate the videos, but they are otherwise intelligible only to a diasporic or native Indonesian audience. This shift in audience also aligns with a change in coverage—one noted by the Jakarta bureau head mentioned above. The new direction for the Jakarta hub seemed to serve urban Jakartan youth as acts of journalistic import. The videos still focus on liminal figures and “human stories,” but instead pursue these topics through the lens of rights-based issues and cultural political struggles, including a SOPA-winning expose on sexual harassment on Indonesian college campuses.⁹⁵

These videos author more “authentic” views of Indonesia, but still mostly represent the liberal-cosmopolitan interests of an educated, urban middle class. The documentary on sexual harassment on college campuses draws together visions of the world struggling with the global export of patriarchal societal norms, focusing on rights-based issues (documenting) tied to the larger cosmopolitan tropes of human rights.⁹⁶ There are also more anthropological studies that visibilize the liminal spaces and figures at the edges of civil society, such as Maluccan debt collectors and a transnational debt cult, both of which offer glimpses into internal Indonesian politics and cosmopolitical frictions via captivating figures and their testimonies.⁹⁷ In the video “Inside Indonesia’s Notorious Debt Collecting Industry,”

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ VICE Asia, “Are Indonesian Universities Failing to Protect the Victims of Sexual Assault?” Video, May 6, 2019.

⁹⁷ VICE, “Inside Indonesia’s Notorious Debt Collecting Industry,” Video, June 20, 2018.

we are confronted with the racial and class hierarchies within Indonesian culture—the viewer is both confronted with the globalization of financial markets and debt and the stigmatized Maluccans who take on debt collection as their job. By characterizing the documentary as one that visibilizes “underworld” figures, the documentary stages an encounter with marginalized others without criticism of their strongman tactics and performative hypermasculinities, nor does it provide a deeper understanding about the debt problems of a globalizing Indonesia. Instead, we are introduced to Maluccans as “stigmatized members of the underworld,” who nevertheless also utilize the opportunity to perform their legitimacy and strength, as well as their own articulation of “cool” masculinity, by shouting down and threatening their targeted debtors.⁹⁸

These documentaries all stage the global entanglements of twenty first century media, finance, and culture by way of their focus on captivating figures and “human stories.” While they range in level of exoticism and/or deployment of colonialist tropes, they also stage an encounter with aspects of our contemporary world that cut across global culture: encounters between “modern,” urban elites and religiously inflected tradition; racism and the differential treatment of various communities; and, most importantly, the global impacts of globalizing speculative capitalist forces on everyday lives. These differing contestations of the cosmos and the political are routed through the possibilities of documentary representation, which both circulate as captivating commodities and, at times, also act as documents for important rights-based claims.

⁹⁸ A similar video focused on “The Infamous Leader of Indonesia’s Debt Cult,” introduces us to the liminal Swissindo World Trust International Orbit by way of focusing on its leader, Soegihartotononegoro, or M1. While it upholds stereotypical tropes that locate scammers outside of the global North, it also provides an interesting redirection of the othering gaze when the VICE host interviews a US woman who moved to Indonesia to join the cult and espouses her evangelism for the cult. VICE, “The Infamous Leader of Indonesia’s Debt Cult,” Video, February 8, 2018.

The impetus to document liminal life experiences as a way to enact a humanitarian-ethical disposition to the world overlaps with histories of activist media and their entanglement with fights for accurate representation. As Merlyna Lim outlines in her history of Southeast Asian activist media, new media have a long history of adoption by grassroots networks as a way to challenge dominant ideologies and have been vital for creating viable social movements in nations and regions with high levels of government media control and censorship.⁹⁹ The globalization of social media platforms has tended to replace other offline activist media, such as blogging networks or community media production, and have been widely adopted as technologies in battles against injustice. Thus, the “documentary impulse” and its entanglements with the tropes of visibilizing, immediacy, and intervention, have proliferated across digital networks. They have become tools for creating powerful narratives and cohering recognizable, viral brands and personalities, who create value through captivating performances and spectacular, decontextualized documentary evidence. Virality (as an opaque measure of captivation) centers captivation and visibility at any and all cost, cutting across both the “activist” rights claims of militant nationalists and those opposing their constructed realities and organizing against continued oppression. At the center of both sides is a focus on personalized, affectively felt pain, which often focuses on highly visible (and easily consumed) modes of change and filters out views that favor complexity, contextuality, and the more difficult battle of national, regional, or planetary change.

When Empires Collude

⁹⁹ Lim, “From Activist Media to Algorithmic Politics.”

Indonesia represents a case in which what Michael Curtin calls “official media” and “commercial media” coexist alongside other modalities of rogue media production, evidenced by the “gado gado” tactics of outlets like EngageMedia and the disinformation networks that characterize Lim’s circulating digitally mediated “tribal nationalisms.”¹⁰⁰ In this way, Indonesia represents the VICE documentary’s imbrications with the various frictions of geopolitical encounter. Moving to another predominantly Muslim country with a different contextual media milieu, a different use of VICE’s documentary surfaces emerges in the much more controlled media environment of Saudi Arabia and the Middle East/North Africa region.

In its original expansion into the MENA region, VICE established an office in the global media capital, Dubai Media City. Launched in 2017, Reuters reported that the office aimed to add up to 50 staff in order to “produce news and lifestyle content in multiple languages including Arabic, English, Farsi, Turkish and Urdu.”¹⁰¹ Created in partnership with Moby Media Group, who also were partially owned by 21st Century Fox, the new venture was announced at a party at the Armani Hotel in the Burj Khalifa—an icon of Dubai media, cultural, and creative capital. While the Reuters article questioned whether VICE would run into ethical issues in a region with entrenched battles over representational power and cultural censorship, Smith offered this promise: “We’re always going to be looking at social justice, we’re always going to be looking at environmental justice, we’re always going to be looking at being on the right side of history, especially with millennials and our audience.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Michael Curtin, “In the Shadow of Official Ambition: National Media Policy Confronts Global Media Capital,” *CARGC Papers* 7, no. 7 (2014).

¹⁰¹ Alexander Cornwell, “Vice Media Takes Its Edgy Journalism to the Middle East,” Reuters, March 29, 2017.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Just two years later, Smith's diatribes were proven to be shallowly presented when the *Wall Street Journal* reported on a private meeting that took place between the CEO and Crown Prince Mohammed bin-Salman on a yacht in August 2018.¹⁰³ This meeting was not the start of a new connection between Saudi-backed media ventures and VICE. Rather, the meeting was intended to extend the work VICE had already performed for "a Saudi government-controlled company" (likely SRMG), during which it produced "documentaries on social reforms in the ultraconservative kingdom," by proposing a joint venture for expanding VICE's presence in the region.¹⁰⁴ The article positioned this strategic move as part of a broader media strategy by bin-Salam, who aimed to "build an international media empire to combat the kingdom's rivals and remake its image in the West" while also offering content for a media-hungry youth audience "more attracted to online platforms like YouTube than the satellite channels their parents watch."¹⁰⁵

The sole documentary video with explicit ties to this deal (or at least the one accessible via the internet in the US) is a video called, "The Camels of Arabia: A Day at the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival."¹⁰⁶ Throughout the video, we follow British VICE correspondent, Charlet Duboc, as she rides alongside a camel racing team and then speaks with participants of a camel beauty contest, with both events acting as part of the celebratory atmosphere of the camel festival. Duboc is notably the only woman in sight throughout the documentary, although the absence of women from the events is never mentioned or addressed. Instead, the events are described as exclusive experiences for the Saudi elites and

¹⁰³ Alex Ritman, "Vice Media Opens First Office in Saudi Arabia," April 1, 2021; Rory Jones, "Saudi Arabia Sought Vice's Help to Build a Media Empire," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Jones, "Saudi Arabia."

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ VICE, "The Camels of Arabia: A Day at the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival," Video, March 20, 2018.

a representation of Saudi wealth and strong culture in the face of modernization. The video traffics in visual spectacle, showcasing the dazzling landscape of the Al-Dahna desert, the wealth of Saudi participants, and the odd innovations that are part of the cultural event, including robot camel jockeys and cheating scandals involving botoxing camel faces to boost entrants' chances of taking home the \$57 million prize for the beauty contest. Despite acting as essentially a paid promotion commissioned by the Saudi government, the video does not differentiate itself from other VICE content save for a final title card that states that the video was produced in collaboration with the Saudi Research and Marketing Group (SRMG).

Notably, there is little focus on Saudi politics or contextual information, which strays from the typical VICE video that attempts to categorize countries in relation to US culture. The video—viewed over 5 million times on YouTube—is rife with comments from US and Saudi/Arab users alike, who repeatedly comment on the beauty of camels, the desert, and Saudi cultural traditions. Whether or not these comments are genuine or manufactured, the text represents an act of virtual place-making in the broader contestations over media, cultural, and creative power characteristic of globalized neoliberal capital. In this case, the branded empire building of VICE and Saudi Arabia collide and collude to produce a “world image” from the vantage of a geopolitical field of visibility economics.

This branded partnership never sat well with VICE's brand image of producing cutting-edge journalism and documentaries that bring light to underreported stories. This raised older questions about VICE's loose journalistic ethics; earlier reporting from the *Columbia Journalism Review* also questioned the work of a “hybrid media company” with thin ethical walls between its journalistic ambitions and profit motives, citing allegations that VICE killed stories that were critical of brands they worked with on the (aptly named) Virtue

side of the company.¹⁰⁷ The deal with SRMG and Saudi Arabia revealed that VICE's content was indeed shaped by its work as a creative agency for global corporations and, in this instance, nations. While the partnership between Prince bin Salman and Shane Smith was reportedly paused after the October 2018 assassination of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Turkish embassy, VICE continued to take shadow money from the kingdom. *The Guardian* found that VICE knowingly continued to pursue opportunities with the Kingdom, evidenced by VICE's covert production of a music festival during the COVID-19 pandemic and distribution of surveys asking VICE employees' opinions on the Kingdom's global perception.¹⁰⁸

Despite criticism of these often-obscured moves to court Saudi money and partnerships, the productions commissioned by Saudi-backed media companies remain difficult to locate, raising questions about what kind of cultural power was purchased through these branded imperial collusions. While there is a dedicated VICE Arabia YouTube channel, most of the videos focus on softer lifestyle content, such as horoscopes, famous rappers, cooking videos, and short interviews on cultural topics. Many of the most popular videos also expand regional borders, focusing on the types of exoticized content typical of many VICE videos, such as Romani bride markets in Bulgaria or Romanian witch communities. Most interestingly of all, the page's banner promotes a series dedicated to both Arab and globally renowned musical artists, produced in collaboration with Durex.¹⁰⁹ An article in *Jadaliyya* locates this partnership within a troubling cosmopolitical battle between Arab identity and

¹⁰⁷ Chris Ip, "The Cult of Vice," *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 2015.

¹⁰⁸ Jim Waterson, "Vice Media Secretly Organised \$20m Saudi Government Festival," *The Guardian*, February 1, 2022; Maxwell Tani, "Vice Uses Staff as Saudi Arabia Focus Group," *The Daily Beast*, July 28, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ "Durex and VICE Arabia Continue Ground-Breaking Music Campaign," *Campaign Middle East*, May 18, 2023.

Western media influences.¹¹⁰ Detailing the vexed place of rap in Arab politics and performative masculinity in a post-Arab Spring region, Mohamad-Ali Nayel identifies the Durex-VICE-MBC production as a vortex of complex geopolitical and cultural relations involving global media institutions like Warner Media Group (WMG):

For when MBS's soft-power arm teams up with VICE to produce a Durex show featuring young Arab rappers signed by WMG, accompanied with soft-porn ambience and mellow colours, dim lights, and careful whispers, they are effectively trying to simulate a liberal desirable Arab model. Then it goes without saying that when MBS VICE and WMG curate and sponsor such cultural representations they are not aiming at making money by selling condoms.¹¹¹

In the article, Nayel mourns the loss of a genre of music that rose out of the political uprisings in 2011 as it became co-opted by both a commercialized global music industry and a Saudi government determined to control the internal and external branded images of Arab culture and political expression.¹¹²

Outside of these frictive, yet lucrative productions, what is notable about VICE and Saudi Arabia's branded collaborations is what is absent from VICE's flagship programs—coverage of various human rights abuses enacted by and political struggles in opposition to the Saudi regime. A cursory review of VICE's HBO series shows only one documentary dedicated to Saudi Arabian politics. Titled "Enemies at the Gates & Global Jihad," the

¹¹⁰ Mohamad-Ali Nayel, "Music Politics After the Arab Uprisings (Part 2)," *Jadaliyya*, June 21, 2022.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Nayel interviewed rappers who participated in the campaign, who told him they "were offering 20,000 dollars for young artists to appear on the show to promote Arab sexuality and shit." As these artists are often struggling to make ends meet, Nayel characterizes this move as a way to co-opt subversive politics: "In the end we all sighed at the irony regarding music that came on the wave of uprisings eleven years ago and is now deployed to dumb down the Arab intellect in such sleazy shows dressed as openness, sexuality and shit." *Ibid.*

episode juxtaposed Saudi Arabia with the impending threat of ISIS's global brand of terror.

Aired in 2015, the description alone papers over various criticisms of the regime:

Stuck in the middle of it all is Saudi Arabia. Confronted by extremism on all sides, the desert kingdom is building massive fences at its borders with Iraq and Yemen to keep out terrorist organizations that it may have had a hand in creating. Suroosh Alvi travels to Saudi Arabia to see how America's staunchest Arab ally is defending itself, and how it may be fanning the flames of global militancy.¹¹³

While VICE's written news content did continue to report on issues of social justice and oppression in Saudi Arabia up until roughly 2022 when the company renewed its interest in creating content with SRMG and MBC, VICE does not appear to have produced any critical video coverage of the Kingdom throughout its rise to global prominence.¹¹⁴

These shadow functionings culminated in a renewed effort to forge ties between Saudi-backed media operatives and VICE. In 2022, VICE announced a partnership deal with MBC and the development of a Riyadh-based headquarters. In this new venture, VICE would transpose its brand of edgy journalism and culture-based documentaries to the emergent creative capital of the JAX Arts District, where it promised to provide mentoring and training "for young talents aspiring to work in the media industry."¹¹⁵ VICE employees and union members vocally criticized these moves, which ultimately resulted in *The Intercept* reporting

¹¹³ Synopsis, IMDB. *VICE*, season 3, episode 12, "Enemies at the Gates & Global Jihad," June 12, 2015.

¹¹⁴ Jim Waterson, "Vice Blocked News Stories That Could Offend Saudi Arabia, Insiders Say," *The Guardian*, August 15, 2023.

¹¹⁵ "Vice Media Group to Open New Riyadh Headquarters," Al Arabiya English, January 5, 2023;

that VICE executives and editors allegedly killed stories that were critical of the Kingdom across its global networks.¹¹⁶

As opposed to the cosmopolitical tensions that haunt the edges of VICE's Indonesia productions, the global in this context acts as a sphere for domination, empire-building, and capital control. Seeking new territories and cash to buoy the company's scale and value, VICE colluded with Saudi Arabian traded their brand and credibility for financial resources and a boost to their global cultural image. This signals the significant geopolitical stakes of the economies of visibility that have taken shape in response to the globalization of creative industries, as well as the deep entanglements between neoliberal projects that manage creative and cultural endeavors as a mode of accumulating cultural and political capital. Documentary media, as a global-popular form attached to producing cultural receptivity via their increasing attachment to viral captivations, becomes a site in which cosmopolitical frictions emerge in a proliferating field of "commodified visibilities."

Feeling Seen, Feeling Silenced: Justice Media and the Cosmopolitical/Cosmopolitist

At the edges of each of these documentaries are contestations of the cosmos, ranging from differing articulations of religious worlding to pulling attention to the displace, restrictive, and exploitative forces of living with globally integrated capital. In the case of Indonesia, the cosmopolitical tensions between neoliberal creative city imaginaries and those left out of these ecologies haunt the images produced in each documentary. While this falls out of the Western interpretations of VICE's Indonesia coverage (and often the exoticized, spectacularized surfaces of those specifically made for HBO), these differing ideas about

¹¹⁶ Nikita Mazurov, "Vice Pulled a Documentary Critical of Saudi Arabia. But Here It Is.," *The Intercept*, September 9, 2023.

rights, nation, and cosmos show the plasticity of the text as an aperture into the cosmopolitical. Yet, what comes out of this relationality is a central focus on “being seen,” which, as the comments section on videos like “Tobaccoland” demonstrate, does not necessitate intelligibility (and nor does it matter?). The semiotic slipperiness of the documentary’s viewing context allows for a multitude of interpretations and intersections, but its validation via virality in a broader proliferation of competing visibilities reifies the centrality of rights-based/humanitarian performativities. The neoliberal state’s abandonment of its outsiders leaves people to compete visually, creatively, stylistically, and technologically through the individual (equally neoliberal) recourse of finding support and community online. As Lim notes, binaries that structure us (community) and them (enemy) are at the heart of political organizing in various global, national, local, and regional contexts today.¹¹⁷ Drawing this together with the viral visceralities of chapter three, social media platforms are awash with documents of injustice, which fuel and are fueled by the visceral politics that emerge in response to the growing global precarities, fears, and insecurities of speculative capitalism run amok.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, these entrenched visual economies are an opportunity for further control. To combat circulating abilities to contest dominant and oppressive regimes, the Kingdom utilizes its vast resources—gained through its control of global oil industries—to control Saudi Arabia’s internal and external image. What cuts across both instances are the geopolitical tensions that emerge at the site of creative capitals, in which media can act as a mode of empowerment and contestation or a site to shore up a branded national image and invite further capital in-flows. At the center of these tensions (at least from the vantage point

¹¹⁷ Lim, “From Activist Media to Algorithmic Politics.”

of VICE's global empire) is the globalization of documentary images, which are used to claim a particular articulation of the global without fully containing the conflicting entanglements that produce their surfaces.

With its focus on “the human stories” of global culture and politics and its offering of a “world of VICE,” VICE's global mediations demonstrate the global travels of documentary immediacy as a biopolitical project. While it can be argued that VICE moved away from the imaging of “bare life” as the company professionalized their documentary practices, a larger question still looms about the biopolitical work and humanitarian functions of the documentary as global-popular form. In this chapter, I have traced the ways that the popularization of spectacular, viral documentary has created a field of competing visibilities mediated by the commercial, commodity-producing algorithmic structures of social media platforms like YouTube. I contend that documentary practices and impulses have escaped their media contexts, and now inform the documentary practices of digital video cultures, particularly when it comes to political communication and social change media. As has been taken up by numerous postcolonial scholars contending with the entrenched divisions and heated up nationalism of our current moment, the communicative capacities of a networked, cosmopolitan multitude united against global capital have failed to materialize in the cosmopolitical frictions of a digitally connected world. As I've argued across the last two chapters, media and visibility have become the clearing ground for political claims and conflicting representations of the global. In this context—as compellingly argued by Chow—virality acts as not just an economy or politics of visibility, but a biopolitics of visibility, which distributes value and mediates what is valuable, and therefore viable, online. To reiterate Chow's vital question from above: “has the ubiquity of such commodified

visibilities replaced freedom's relevance altogether, in an age in which human existence seems inconceivable without viral media dependency, which therefore must be recognized as nothing less than a vital force—literally, a life link?”¹¹⁸

For Rangan, documentary has developed into a mode for weighing rights claims, contemplating innocence and value, and meting out justice. In an article interrogating the rise of popular social justice documentaries and true crime, Rangan and Brett Story argue that “true crime and the social justice documentary have long shared a penchant for narratives plotted through mysteries, miseries, and misdemeanors,”¹¹⁹ or otherwise, captivating stories that lead into the kinds of captivational positionalities described by Chow. Rangan is critical of the proliferation of true crime—even its best, most reformist iterations—due to its connections to reifying the institutional significance of crime, justice, and innocence despite their roots in Enlightenment-era disciplinary regimes.

I make this digression into true crime and social justice documentaries to show their connectivities to the work of “a world of VICE,” which offers to connect global media youth culture via creativity, politics, and communities on the margins. As a form of biopolitical management, this conjuncture of images, politics, affective states of captivation, and their valorization through virality routes political action toward image justice rather than alternative modes of political action and organization. This serves to double down on the role of social media and digital connectivity as vital infrastructures that, if only were made more democratic and more accessible, could guide us toward a cosmopolitan, democratic utopia. Yet, this dependence for political action also serves to reify the power, normative structures,

¹¹⁸ Chow, *Entanglements*, 168.

¹¹⁹ Pooja Rangan and Brett Story, “Four Propositions on True Crime and Abolition,” *World Records Journal* 5 (March 12, 2022): 1–8.

and visual economies that simultaneously “give voice” to the oppressed and their more malevolent mutants, like ethnic nationalists and white supremacists, who equally lay claim to being “silenced” and marginalized in order to (re)gain visibility,

This double-bind is at the heart of conversations about decoloniality, fugitivity, and the pursuit not of reform, but reparation and pluriversal thinking. Confronted with the entrenched battle for national identity in Indonesia, Lim eventually ends up embracing a tactic of dis/connection as a mode for activist engagement that strategically engages with visual economies but also avoids their performative, disciplinary, and surveillant gaze.¹²⁰ She argues that, at the heart of radical politics today, is a need to embrace not further connectivity and regimes of visibility, but rather a tactical approach to dis/connection. Dis/connection acts as an assemblage of tactics that utilizes malleability to “navigate in/visibility, the interplay between visibility and invisibility” in response to authorized media in repressive regimes, which “exercise their power through the economy of visibility, to render the power invisible and the people visible.”¹²¹ While this assemblage acknowledges the need to connect in order to create spaces for political appearance in contestation to power’s invisibilizing capacities, dis/connection also embraces tactical disappearance, “where the collective is temporarily invisible from the surveillance gaze.”¹²² This approach is built from critical discourses that present digital disconnection as a mode of political speech, such as Kaun and Treré’s embrace of “tactics that force adversaries to disconnect, along with the (almost) completely eschewing of digital media and the partial disconnection from specific platforms as form of

¹²⁰ Merlyna Lim, “The Politics and Perils of Dis/connection in the Global South,” *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 4 (2020): 1-8.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 6

¹²² *Ibid.*, 7.

political resistance.”¹²³ In other words, part of the political project of constituting freedom in the face of virality as a vital force involves finding other ways to appear and disappear, connect and disconnect, that route away from the false promises of commercially developed digital infrastructures.

By articulating difference via documentary, VICE’s media empire plays into an extractive economy of what George Yudice has described as “disorganized capitalism.”¹²⁴ For Yudice, placing our proverbial bets on difference alone misses the ways that culture itself has become a resource that can be enclosed and articulated as sources of value and currency for both distribution of rights and affordances through state and civil society apparatuses, as well as for making do in a capitalist system that involves the shrinking of state life supports. Thus, encouragements to “broadcast yourself” and document abuses may play into the centralization of power in commercial infrastructures that thrive on captivation, and spaces like YouTube, Facebook, and others in which “subversive performativity may actually enhance the system rather than threaten it. The system feeds off of ‘disorder.’”¹²⁵ Within this context, virality—or the assigning of visibility and/as power—indeed acts as life force.

¹²³ Cited in text. Ibid., 8.

¹²⁴ George Yudice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 33.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

The Death of VICE

Shortly preceding the company's decline that started in late 2018, VICE released a breakout video in August 2017 that went viral, reverberating outwards across digital platforms and mainstream news discourse. In "Charlottesville: Race and Terror," reporter Elle Reeves "embedded" with white nationalists as they prepared for the horrific scenes of racism and bigotry that accompanied the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which occurred just a few days before the video's release on YouTube and HBO.¹ She interviews white nationalist figureheads like Christopher Cantwell and rides along with right-wing protesters, centering their careful displays of victimhood at the hands of the "woke," communist liberal elite they claim to be organizing against. The video places viewers in the center of tussles with police and counterprotesters at the rally, creating provocative images of organized rows of tiki-torch-carrying men and displaying wounded white nationalists who have been maced by so-called "communists."

Halfway through, the video shifts directions to another scene of violence—the scene of a protest organized by anti-fascist counterprotesters, whose own (more peaceful) protest was fractured by the murderous actions of James Alex Fields Jr., who drove his car into the middle of the densely packed crowd, killing three people. The video places us in the middle of this violent and chaotic scene, oscillating between drone camera footage of the area and close-ups of injured people receiving medical treatment. This portion of the video zooms in on the visceral reactions of the witnesses and surviving victims, who scream in front of and

¹ Vice News Tonight, "Charlottesville: Race and Terror," Video, August 14, 2017.

at the camera to communicate their trauma to distant viewers. The video ends with the recuperative actions of those involved in these two distinct visions of Charlottesville. The anti-fascist protesters gather to collectively process and grieve their traumatic losses and double down on their commitments to removing racist icons from their public spaces, while Chris Cantwell—interviewed in a hotel room where he displays his many firearms to Reeves—frames the event as a necessary part of their broader struggle, stating that “the fact that nobody on our side died, I’d call that points for us.”

The video is affectively impactful, providing vivid, immersive views into each group’s ideological and political identities.² In a way similar to “The Islamic State,” it privileges embodied communication through immersion and intense scenes of heightened affect. It conveys what I have identified as the visceral politics of our time—polarized, binaristic, and driven by the desire to identify cohesive enemies—which are rendered aesthetically impactful through VICE’s immersive views and intense, visceral scenes. What’s rendered visible in this video is the visceral feelings of being involved in these two communities, with each emphasizing their affectively charged political worlds, which are connected through their differing claims to who belongs in Charlottesville, Virginia. In this way, the video privileges the inside view without overt context or history, deflecting from questions about the propagandizing potentialities, particularly regarding VICE’s choice to stay with white supremacist groups for most of the video with little hardline questioning of their dogmatic beliefs. Throughout the video, Cantwell clearly sees his participation in the video as a way to build legitimacy for his extreme views, up his visibility in online white

² I have to admit, I can’t watch the second half of the video without being viscerally, emotionally impacted despite the numerous times I’ve watched it during the research for this project.

supremacist circles, and—just as likely—build his brand and potential earnings as a powerful political pundit.

On a broader scale, the video maps and documents the polarized, visceral worlds of today's digital culture, which emerge as connected, but diametrically opposed visions thoroughly entangled with one another yet rendered as a battle against "us" and "them." This video encapsulates the key tension across a variety of research and discourse on today's digital culture. The internet—once a tool for the "right" kind of organizing and political mobilization—has now been co-opted by racists, ethno-nationalists, and populists. What I have sketched throughout these chapters are the fallacies of this techno-utopian perspective—the internet has historically attracted a mix of anti-mainstream actors. As evidenced by VICE's own history within the space and the broader tech economy, the "freedom" of the internet cuts across different political affiliations and ideologies. Early "Web TV," tech start-ups, digital media companies, and VICE magazine issues (as a microcosm of the young, hip proto-creative economy) were spaces where white supremacists, libertarians, socialists, and communists often mixed, collaborated, and produced the fabrics of today's digital cultures.³

The video also indexes a shift in the scholarly and popular disposition towards the internet. As many scholars across this dissertation have noted, the viral democratic dreams of President Barack Obama's electoral campaign and the viral revolutionary potentials of social media as tools for freedom of speech and activism have given way to entrenched, divisive,

³ Of course, this is likely due to the overwhelmingly homogenous socioeconomic makeup of these spaces; many scholars have consistently point out the ways that internet culture has always been entangled with white supremacy and discrimination. See: *Lisa Nakamura, Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minnesota University Press, 2007). Today, this involves critical race and algorithms studies like: Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

increasingly binary discursive environments online. In “Charlottesville: Race and Terror,” we witness not just a shift in the co-optation of social media by the actors of “bad virality” outside the nation (such as ISIS in 2014), but also the ways that these binary frames (terrorist vs. activist, for example) have come home in various national, local, and regional contexts.⁴ Digital media are at the center of these changes, but they are not the root cause. As Merlyna Lim finds in her work in Southeast Asia, “the mutual shaping between users and algorithms results in the formation of algorithmic enclaves that, in turn, produce multiple forms of tribal nationalism... social media users claim and legitimize their own versions of nationalism by excluding equality and justice for others.”⁵ Thus, the feedback loop between commercial algorithms’ penchant for extreme affect and the globalized insecurity and precarity wrought by capitalist extraction, displacement, dispossession have exacerbated the precarity felt globally. As people struggle to live, they look to others who are in similar pain, leading to, according to Mbembe, “brutal survivalism in an ultracompetitive environment,” or visceral politics.⁶

It is important to note that waves of leftist, decolonial organizing and the reactionary machinations of white supremacist, patriarchal culture are entangled with one another; they are cosmopolitical positions that morph to the various colonial and imperial legacies across the world. And if we return to Sara Ahmed’s increasingly vital theories about “affective economies,” we have to recognize that both are animated by the community values that were embodied by the early, liberatory discourses of the internet.⁷ They both center on freedom yet

⁴ One could argue that the labeling of white supremacists as domestic terrorists perpetuates the dehumanizing logic we use to justify racism.

⁵ Merlyna Lim, “Freedom to Hate: Social Media, Algorithmic Enclaves, and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia,” *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 424.

⁶ Achille Mbembe, “Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Viscerality,” YouTube, Duke Franklin Humanities Institute, 2016.

⁷ Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (79) (June 1, 2004): 117–39.

distract from the structural causes that perpetuate binary distinctions and dehumanization. As Lim notes above, they function by denying humanity and “excluding equality and justice for others.” I agree with Lim’s contention here that—despite the revolutionary, inclusive discourse of progressive movements—politics and culture refracted through the opaque algorithms of digital platforms “deepens divisions among social groups in society and amplifies animosity and intolerance against each other.”⁸ But I also agree that part of this process is, as Lilie Chouliaraki contends, finding avenues for context, history, ambiguity, and dialogue by refusing to shape our sense of reality through algorithms and resisting virality as an index of truth or authenticity.⁹ Thus, virality—rather than being a tool for contagious liberation—seems to only function undemocratically by stoking and rewarding increasingly divisive, simplified, endless loops of viral trends that reduce culture, history, and politics to a matter of for or against, enemy or friend, with us or against us.

Scholars wading into these troubled waters fight an uphill battle; the very infrastructures that facilitate radical connections and possibilities are the same ones used by others to spread viral hate. Chouliaraki offers that we need radical accountability structures that transcend the individualized articulations of pain and contextualize affect-driven claims of trauma and victimization. She writes that a “prominent feature of such marketized claims to trauma or injury is that, in the name of economic profit, they tend to personalize pain and neglect the structural causes that lie behind it... In this context, pointing out this distinction between condition and claim is not only analytically important, as I hope to have shown, but

⁸ Lim, “Freedom to Hate,” 424.

⁹ Chouliaraki finds that virality “tends to amplify already popular claims to suffering without asking questions about who makes them or in which contexts of violence or vulnerability they appear,” Chouliaraki, “Victimhood: The Affective Politics of Vulnerability,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (February 2021): 20.

also normatively significant. For, as Brooks puts it, it helps us tell the difference between ‘promoting a victimhood culture’ and ‘fighting for victimized people.’”¹⁰ On the side of activist politics, Merlyna Lim advocates for a strategic approach to social media visibility politics by way of “dis/connection,” which combats the surveillance of resistant publics by way of engaging tactically with visibility and invisibility.¹¹

While these insights (and others I do not have space to detail here) provide vital interventions in a polarizing field that studies bad virality as misinformation on the one hand and good virality as activism and social justice on the other, they all inevitably invest in the vital role of the viral image for resistant and activist publics. In this way, they each often invest in the power of viral, visceral images, which index the harms, atrocities, and injuries that unify and divide various identities and communities. Yet, as Adi Kuntsman argues, the affective impact of an image is not stable. She asks: “[D]o our viral circulations of anti-Palestinian violence actually acknowledge Palestinian life, or merely recirculate their death?... How do we think of our [white, Western] viral circulations of Palestinian citizen witnessing in the digital political field where Palestinian death is simultaneously denied *and* legitimized; digitally hybervisible *and* dismissed?”¹² In raising these questions, Kuntsman questions the ways that justice frameworks have given way to insular affective economies of love and hate, which has sparked the proliferation of visceral images and mediated trauma in a way that transforms digital spaces into either hypercapitalistic spectacle or a digital graveyard of forever-exhumed bodies. Through close attention to one example of a media

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹¹ Merlyna Lim, “The Politics and Perils of Dis/Connection in the Global South,” *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 4 (2020): 618–25.

¹² Adi Kuntsman, “Reverberation, Affect, and Digital Politics of Responsibility,” in Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davies, eds., *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means* (New York: Routledge, 2021): 77–78.

company trafficking in visceral images of “bare life,” I question whether or not our image economies can shift when we continue to center the vital power of social media platforms and their commercial, opaque algorithms as the space for political mobilization. They are indeed powerful tools with global effects, but we should recognize them for what they are—not democratic spaces for discourse, but concentrated media powers that benefit from our affective attachments.

The stakes for commercial platforms’ globalizations have been made abundantly clear. Scholars have already documented moments when Facebook cooperates with national governments to censor and ban critical speech in exchange for access to their citizens’ eyes, attention, and money. Left and right political communities—as well as popular, militant fandoms—engage in acts of image policing by trolling or bullying any challenging perspectives, often by lobbying around the now equally as viral notion of “fake news.” In this way, efforts to battle misinformation, such as the viral conspiracy theories of the QAnon community, are weaponized by governments and political subjects alike as a way to tamp down perspectives critical of their insular worldviews. In this chaos, the truth lies in what resonates with gut emotions and visceral forms of authentication, which serves to further dehumanize the “them” that threatens “us.”

While seemingly separate from these ground-level affective economies, VICE Media acts as a case study for tracing the emergence of the viral as a replacement for the social, the emergence of affect as the currency of digital value and authenticity, and the rise of divisive political atmospheres that mobilize economies of viscosity to gain cultural (and sometimes financial) capital. My close study of VICE—as a container for or reflection of these shifting constellations of affect, media, culture, and capital—traces key moments in the rise of these

broader digital economies and ecologies. What the rise of data-hungry digital platforms has done is to invite the self-disciplinary modalities of authenticity discourse, alterity, and branding to emerge as lucrative business models. They encourage us to “express ourselves,” and reward the views that gain the most virality, which has in turn found its way into political and activist community-formation. News cultures and documentary praxes—two genres that attempt to represent “the real” or visibilize distant cultures—are caught up in these dynamics. While sensationalism and spectacle in the news certainly has a long history, my research shows that combating the entanglements between visual news and biopolitical visual politics will not be solved by more data, better technologies, or increased dependence on digital platforms.

VICE’s rise to popularity indexes these broader changes, demonstrating the reversals and intensifications that emerged at various moments in the 2010’s. The aftermath of the 2016 US election (and the global rise in populist nationalist rhetoric) has put media companies’ internal operations and external outputs under the microscope, creating both accountability for exploitative practices and stoking further destabilization of news genres on digital channels. Since 2018, VICE has fallen from its cultural and industrial zenith. While the entrepreneurial Shane Smith was able to conjure enough speculative value in VICE’s brand during its rise in the “messy middle” of digital video markets, a developed market around digital streaming video has called his various bluffs, leading to the company’s inability to gain profitability. Journalism industry pundits blame platforms’ monopolization of advertising dollars for the demise of giants like BuzzFeed News and VICE, yet my research has shown that their rise to power was born out of the investment fervor of a speculative bubble with little attachment to the longevity or quality of journalism institutions.

In the end, it was VICE's (false) promises of a "global empire" that put the nail in the VICE coffin—bankruptcy proceedings reveal that VICE was dependent on its global licensing and branded content deals to keep the lights on. A missed payment from a murkily defined global partner (which I read speculatively in chapter four as Saudi Arabia's MBC) caused a cash crisis as VICE could no longer pay its accruing debts, causing a freeze of all VICE's domestic banking accounts and sending the company into bankruptcy.

VICE now stands in limbo—a zombie company, it still produces "content" in some capacity, but has scaled back its overall operations. It also failed to conjure its global aspirations at many points, with efforts to launch hubs in China and India repeatedly failing to take hold.¹³ This bust of VICE's "revolutionary" narrative pairs with broader changes in the creative economy; following the large-scale reorganization of urban space in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, VICE pulled out of its deal to move into the Brooklyn Navy Yard's Dock 72. Just this year, they joined the graveyard of Brooklyn institutions priced out of its hip, luxury skyline. In September 2023, VICE announced it would be vacating its offices at 285 Kent in Williamsburg, which it could no longer afford.¹⁴ This ironic reversal indexes the creative economy's "fall from grace," in which digital workers are increasingly fighting the exploitative aspects of informal media economies: freelance workers, journalists, and entire digital companies are unionizing against the kinds of informal, frenetic, and often life-consuming work dynamics of the early creative economy, and urban downtowns have

¹³ There are also a number of interesting scandals to track in regard to VICE's relationship to the global. For example, VICE Asia posted an interview with an artist who recolored, digitally manipulated, and displayed photos of Cambodian victims who were murdered by the Khmer Rouge. The artist (and VICE) did not seek permission to display the photos from victims' families, causing significant backlash from the victims' families and the Cambodian government. See: Prak Chan Thul and Kay Johnson, "After Outcry, VICE Removes Images Adding Smiles to Khmer Rouge Victims," *Reuters*, April 11, 2021.

¹⁴ Lois Weiss, "Vice Media Scraps Planned Move to Rudin Management's Dock 72," *The Real Deal*, May 18, 2022; Gabe Friedman, "Vice Is Packing Its Bags and Moving out of Williamsburg," *Brooklyn Magazine*, September 3, 2023.

become ghost towns because of the pandemic-induced flight due to the extension of remote work.¹⁵ Across all of these fronts, the “creative revolution” inspired by the rise of participatory media and accessible media technologies has fallen flat in the face of media platforms’ consolidated powers.¹⁶

Throughout this dissertation, I have contended with the affective and material structures that produced and animated “a world of VICE.” Steeped in the anti-mainstream affects and desires of the early 2000’s, VICE built an empire out of widespread industrial, political, and cultural destabilization that has become synonymous with the digital age. As I have argued throughout the four research chapters, VICE as a company fed parasitically off the utopian, progressive hopes of a more democratized news, cultural, and creative world, powered by people wanting to make a difference, be creative, and challenge dominant systems of power. These desires have not gone away—instead, the economy of visceral videos amplifies and refracts these desires, driving the rise of bounded communities, united by what kind of change they wish to enact. Viral videos are thus imbricated with our desire to find collectivities and connectivities in an increasingly embattled world, but they also uphold the vital function of the social media companies who design, control, and monetize our engagements with one another. Viscerality—both in its aesthetic capacity and as a modality of affect—has become our primary mode for identifying truth, which is produced alongside the opacity of opaquely-developed algorithms and metrics.

This research has tracked VICE’s history as it shape-shifted to fit various power shifts in the increasingly complex media ecology. It has also sketched the aesthetics, tastes, and

¹⁵ John Rennie Short, “Traditional Downtowns Are Dead or Dying in Many US Cities – What’s next for These Zones?,” *The Conversation*, September 25, 2023.

¹⁶ These changes are paired with the widespread closing of various DIY publications that were central to building indie media culture at the turn of the digital, such as Jezebel and *Bitch* magazine.

cultures that surround the VICE brand, particularly as the brand is materialized by VICE's visceral aesthetics and boundary-pushing journo-documentary visual style. Yet, it has also only taken a small slice of VICE's media empire. I have focused primarily on VICE's flagship news documentaries through its shows like VICE (on HBO, Showtime, Hulu) and Vice News Tonight; yet, VICE's documentary and reality-based production spans a range of content, including cooking shows (Action Bronson's *Fuck That's Delicious*), tourism (Elliot Page's *Gaycation* and various drug tourism shows), and one-off documentary series (like *Woman*, hosted by Gloria Steinem), comedy shows (*Desus and Mero*; *Trixie and Katya*), and streaming-distributed documentaries (such as *Fyre: The Greatest Party That Never Happened* (2019)). It will be interesting to see what happens to VICE's library and business structure in its post-bankruptcy organization; as a platform-agnostic production facility, some of VICE's content is relatively inaccessible at this point. While one can still purchase old episodes of VICE on HBO on YouTube, the recent MAX reconfiguration has wiped VICE from the company's catalog. Similarly, VICE on Showtime episodes are entirely unavailable, even through Showtime's content libraries on streaming apps. Showtime's cancellation of the show has also been controversial, mired in the network's abrupt deletion of a VICE documentary containing critical reporting on Governor Ron DeSantis.¹⁷ I find that these cases could expand the arguments I have laid out here, and further comparison between VICE's company history and those of BuzzFeed, Vox, Mic, and others may produce critical work on this era for the historiographical and scholarly record.

To sum things up, we are routinely confronted with the promises and pitfalls of the personalized media that were meant to replace mass media's tendencies toward control,

¹⁷ Rick Porter, "'Vice' Pulled From Showtime, Looks for New Home," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 13, 2013; Rick Porter, "Ron DeSantis Episode of 'Vice' Pulled by Showtime" *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 4, 2023.

synergy, and corporate or political greed. Yet, the acceleration of global finance capital, speculative markets, neoliberal entrepreneurialism, and the velocity of the global, commercial internet have propelled media to embrace the speculative value-making practices of spectacle, brands, and digital influence tactics. My research on VICE has demonstrated the ways that the company consistently manufactured value through speculative means, by way of circulating and justifying commodity spectacles that built its edgy brand image. While VICE's successes were often immaterial (virality, global expansions, metrics, overall value), these immaterial parts of VICE's operations impact material structures locally, nationally, and globally. As a case study, VICE Media's history epitomizes Anna Tsing's arguments about the spectacularization of capital accumulation, in which brands ultimately communicate cultural and financial value without having to prove these spectacular conjurings.¹⁸ The globalization of an economy of appearances is what stokes the often polarized, brand-attentive political mobilizations that go viral (and make money) online, cutting across both left and right.

¹⁸ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

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