

# Platformizing Webtoons: The Impact on Creative and Digital Labor in South Korea

Ji-Hyeon Kim<sup>1</sup>  and Jun Yu<sup>2</sup> 

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## Abstract

Despite the transformative benefits of platform technology for cultural production, critical scholars have raised vigilance against the emergence of digital platforms as a new hegemonic constellation of 21st-century capitalism, and the neoliberal governance and exploitation of labor that concomitantly intensify. Taking as a case study, the platformization of the “Webtoon” industry in South Korea, this article addresses such concerns, questioning the potentially detrimental effects of platforms on creative labor and their dominance in the market. More importantly, however, it commands wider attention to how platformization has been restructuring this particular cultural industry, and reveals that this process does not simply augment exploitation. Instead, focusing our analysis on the reconfiguration of the process of Webtoon production and the opportunities it affords for the creative labor, we illuminate the complication of relationship between the involved actors, and argue for a broader scope of inquiry that makes explicit the ramifications of platformization on cultural production.

## Keywords

creative industry, cultural production, digital platform, platformization, Webtoon

## Introduction

Webtoon has a relatively short history, dating to the beginning of the 21st century when a few skilled amateur comic-enthusiasts began to publish their work digitally on their personal websites shortly after the emergence of the World Wide Web. However, it was the arrival of Webtoon platforms around the mid-2000s that brought the most significant transformation. Not only has the number and market value of Webtoons spiraled upward since then, but public interest and recognition of their value has also been greatly enhanced. Meanwhile, Webtoon platforms have come to be deemed as the most efficient routes to follow for anyone wishing to become a successful comic artist, thereby contributing to the decline of the Korean comic publication industry (Han & Jeon, 2011). Virtually all Webtoons today are published on *centralized* Webtoon platforms, which operate in a complex multi-sided market.

Analyzing the case of Webtoons and their production against the backdrop of platformization, we aim to demonstrate how visual and cultural goods in a non-Western context are increasingly rendered “contingent” on particular platforms (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Few academic studies have analyzed Webtoons to date, despite their meteoric rise in popularity and growing recognition among South Korean society. Moreover, existing studies directed attention toward

Webtoons *themselves* as a separate entity, either as a pedagogic tool (Choi, 2016), or as an engine of the new Korean Wave<sup>1</sup> (Jang & Song, 2017). In some studies, the focus has been on the “binary relationship” between platforms and content creators, often articulating their relationship in terms of the capitalist exploitation of creative labor (Jin, 2015).

While these studies have raised important questions, in this article we distance ourselves *both* from glamorizing the results of platform technologies, and from a general political economy-based critique of platforms. Rather, we aim to provide a more comprehensive picture by situating Webtoons within a broader analytical prism, to reveal how the structure of this particular cultural industry, the processes of Webtoon production, and platform-labor relationships are undergoing processes of parallel transformation within the context of platforms.

From this vantage point, our primary objective is to show that the platformization of the Webtoon industry not only entails appropriation of content creators as a new asset, but

<sup>1</sup>Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

<sup>2</sup>London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

## Corresponding Author:

Jun Yu, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, Holborn, London WC2A 2AE, UK.  
Email: J.Yu20@lse.ac.uk



that it also complicates the relationship between the involved actors including audiences, while ushering in the conceptual and organizational shift that observes changes to how value is produced (Polanyi, 1957). In so doing, we will also elucidate the extent to which content creators *can* benefit from the platformization of the Webtoon industry, and the enjoyment they derive from drawing Webtoons, which forms the foremost portion of their motivation to participate in the Webtoon industry. Importantly, these content creators *legally* own their Webtoons, and have sufficient freedom to migrate to other Webtoon platforms. Thus, they are sometimes prioritized by Webtoon platforms as a vital asset and key driver for the continuous production of Webtoons. Contrary to what is presented in some Marxist accounts, it is premature to conclude that those aspects of creative labor associated with pleasure have become subsumed by capitalist relationships and purposes.

This inquiry is primarily concerned with the production and labor aspects of Webtoons. There are two reasons for this. First, despite a radical shift in the modes of circulation and consumption following the introduction of Webtoon “apps,” the Web is pivotal to the production of Webtoons. We will return to this point later, but it is noteworthy that virtually all Webtoon platforms operate as three-tier competitions,<sup>2</sup> encouraging an open and laissez-faire contest. Every prospective content creator competes for promotion from the basic tier to the second tier, and ultimately to the top tier, achieving this by obtaining positive user feedback and ratings. However, with apps it is neither possible to observe the competition in the basic and second tiers, or to read and rate the quality of Webtoons in those tiers. To do so, users must access the Web.<sup>3</sup>

Second, we believe that the labor market and employment model for the Webtoon industry are worthy of analysis in their own right. Digital labor pool-based platforms *per se* are certainly not exclusive to Webtoon; other multi-sided platforms such as YouTube create value by enabling direct interactions and transactions between two or more distinct users, affording mutual benefits. However, Webtoon platforms not only support interactions between content creators and audiences but also directly commission creators, thereby playing a quasi-editorial role,<sup>4</sup> allowing both parties to enter into a legally binding employment contract. This indicates that the crowdsourcing labor model for Webtoon platforms is more layered than that of many other two- or multi-sided platforms, and, as such, may extend the concerns of several other political economists who are anxious about the dominance and increasing indispensability of institutions in our life (e.g., Fuchs, 2017; Jin, 2017; Srnicek, 2017), in ways that further reinforce neoliberal governance.

The research builds on the enduring tradition of studies of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993), situating Webtoons within the changing technical *and* social conditions of production, referring not only to platforms and content creators *per se* but also to audiences, platform staff, the traditional comics

industry, and the multi-sided networked relationship between involved actors. Furthermore, we use the term “platform” to recall the definition offered by Langley and Leyshon (2017), which considers a platform as “a discrete and dynamic arrangement defined by a particular combination of *socio-technical and capitalist business practices*” (p.13; italics added). This means we broaden the analytical prism of Webtoon platforms, viewing them not just as technical intermediaries, but as institutional mediators, shaping the performance of actors in the cultural field (van Dijck, 2013). It is by conceptualizing the platform in this fashion that we can most effectively identify the basic parameters that inform the production of Webtoons, adapting their associated labor models and norms.

Operationalizing the research, we conducted, between 2015 and 2017, in-depth semi-structured interviews with 14 “Webtoonists” (Webtoon + cartoonists)<sup>5</sup> working on Naver or Daum Webtoons—the two largest and oldest Webtoon platforms in South Korea, and a 2-year online observation of Webtoonists’ interactions with audiences of Naver and Line Webtoons. The data were originally gathered as part of one of the author’s PhD thesis,<sup>6</sup> within a slightly different framework, and so we reanalyzed them with a focus on the participants’ experience of Webtoon production in the platformized context. Our analysis was thematic and interpretative, including only limited data from stakeholders of those platforms, as the main objective was not so much to explicate the changing business model or the platform-centric structure of a profit-making enterprise *itself*, but rather illuminating, from the ground up, how creative labor *within* the context of changing technical and social conditions engages in practices of cultural production through routinized use of platforms. The following section investigates how Webtoon platforms secure a number of both Webtoonists and amateurs to sustain and advance growth.

## The Shifting Mode of Comic and Webtoon Production

The production of Webtoons is distinguishable from that of both web/digital comics *and* printed comic strips in South Korea (called *manhwa*) in several aspects. Web and digital technologies significantly lowered the cost of digital image creation by reducing the need for drawing tools (e.g., drawing pens, screentone), while enhancing the readiness with which a larger audience can be reached. Since the mid-2000s, Web portals have further expanded these opportunities, providing a “free” online platform committed to the publication of Webtoons, which eliminates the creators’ need to pay a small hosting fee for individual websites, and offers a more extensive opportunity to interact with myriad users on web portals (Song, 2012). Furthermore, Webtoon generally comprises of vertically arranged images, and so users scroll from top to bottom when reading a Webtoon. This mode of presentation allows content creators to show one large-size image on screen, making it less restricted in

terms of the “layout” of images, which is crucial for storytelling using printed comic strips (Harvey, 1996, p. 162), and other web/digital comics that observe the same type of image arrangement (Yun, 2013).

According to the interviewees who had previously worked with publishers, creating the above type of “layout” was considered an important drawing technique that all comic artists in the *manhwa* industry were expected to acquire. The expectation relates to what many interviewees consider one of the most notable differences between the *manhwa* and Webtoon industries. Specifically, it refers to the absence within Webtoon industries of a particular social and cultural capital known to have guided production in the *manhwa* industry, where junior comic artists and amateurs were customarily expected to work initially as apprentices for senior artists. They would also receive help from a team of assistants when drawing *manhwa*, and take on board regular advice from the ‘*dam-dang-ja*’, that is comic experts working for publishers in the *manhwa* industry (Korea Creative Content Agency [KOCCA], 2016a). The then-artists of the future received vocational training on preferred technical drawing skills (such as producing the effective “layout”), built informal networks, and developed their practical knowledge, all of which were deemed essential to be able to work as a professional. The influence of the *dam-dang-ja* was also far-reaching, not least because they not only offered constructive feedback, but they also assumed several managerial responsibilities, such as gathering fans’ opinions, measuring the popularity of comics, and making decisions about commissioning and serializing new publications.

Conversely, Webtoon platforms distribute and publish Webtoons, rarely intervening in the production process as outlined by Mi-Soo:

Regarding printed comics, publishers’ decisions impose some severe constraints on production. I felt like I was working with my *dam-dang-ja* throughout the entire process of drawing, from writing a script to conceiving stories and plots. My *dam-dang-ja* was a man with lots of experiences. He gave me guidelines on drawing and I actually learned a lot. But Webtoon platform, the staff there just receive my Webtoon and click to upload it. That’s all. One click. (Mi-Soo, personal communication, 8 June 2015)

It is worth considering the effects of the absence of economic capital, technical training, expert advice, and other features on Webtoon platforms, associated with their being free of charge. Digital publication opportunities have been welcomed by many, particularly amateur Webtoonists who view them as having reduced “barriers” to becoming a comic artist (Su-Bin, personal communication, 28 June 2015). Digital publication, of course, demands a unique set of technical skills and a certain degree of computer savviness. But all the interviewees, including those who had previously received training to become traditional comic artists, remarked that they would happily learn new computing and image production techniques through “self-study,” to avoid having to do

“any analogue work [pen and paper drawing] given the cost-effectiveness of digital production” (Jin-Ah, personal communication, 8 June 2015). Virtually everyone is allowed to publish their work freely regardless of its quality, or the extent of their previous experience, as is best manifested by Naver Webtoon’s slogan: “*You can be a comic artist!*” This characterizes participation and competition on the platform as “open to all-comers” (Gillespie, 2017). Lacking a sense of “industry censorship,” in tandem with platforms being “free” distribution channels, has fuelled a huge increase in the number of Webtoons (Song, 2012, p. 134), and the rapid growth of Webtoon platforms, their parent companies (web portals), and the Webtoon industry itself.

In light of the transition from printed comic strips to Webtoons, it is no coincidence that competition to become a Webtoonist is increasingly being recognized as an individual-driven project. *Prima facie*, the minimal influence of economic, social, and cultural capital on the production of Webtoons appears to dictate that the creation of cultural content is contingent upon the capacity of individuals who have the “free will” to organize and plan their Webtoons in their own ways: “It is possible to draw and serially publish Webtoons *only if I have the will*” (Sun-Min, personal communication, 15 June 2015; interviewee’s emphasis). Accordingly, we find a much greater diversity in Webtoons than is present in the *manhwa* industry, in terms of genres, methods of production, and even across the demographic and educational backgrounds of the artists. The meaning of “expertise” for a comic artist in the Webtoon industry differs considerably from that of the *manhwa* industry, wherein the production of cultural content was guided and influenced by experts’ help, and measured against certain sets of expectations associated with both quality and standards. One of the interviewees, Jin-Ah, observed “a high-school student debuting as a professional Webtoonist when he gained some recognition,” concluding that winning the competition to become a Webtoonist no longer hinges primarily on skills, experiences, or experts’ decisions (Jin-Ah, personal communication, 8 June 2015).

We can view the expanding number of amateur content creators as a typical example of “mass amateurisation” (Shirky, 2008), in which anybody—especially non-professionals—can produce and publish creative content on a scale that would otherwise be daunting within the traditional *manhwa* production model, and yet can still compete with established comic publishers. The result of the scale of this mass-amateurization is momentous: Webtoons have become economically prosperous, with resulting financial repercussions for the Korean comic book/magazine market. The Webtoon market is valued at US\$368 million, and this is expected to double to US\$894 million by the end of 2020 (KOCCA, 2017).

Virtually all Webtoons are produced by individuals and mediated on platforms free-of-charge. The growing popularity of this *prima facie* free distribution model has redefined

conventional consumer norms, that is, Webtoons are generally thought of as “freely accessible” cultural content. This change was originally expected to increase the risks for extant publishers (Han & Jeon, 2011, p. 8), and indeed, several interviewees pointed out that all but one of the comic magazines in South Korea had been discontinued, leaving such platforms as the most efficient route via which to become a comic artist. Meanwhile, with their growing international popularity and market value, and the increasing number of adaptations into films, adverts, TV dramas, mobile games, and other cultural products, Webtoons have come to be perceived of as an important resource for general Korean cultural industries and the Korean Wave (Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange, 2014). Consequently, according to the interviewee Sun-Min, those comic artists who were once “treated contemptuously as a dauber” have since been reconceptualized as a crucial human resource, infusing a variety of cultural industries with innovative ideas (Sun-Min, personal communication, 15 June 2015).

### Setting Up the New Rules of the Game

Webtoon platforms have successfully aggregated audiences, procuring both amateurs and professional comic artists, who have combined to make up a greater labor pool, demonstrating a “winner-takes-all” effect (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Arguably, the status of their parent companies’ web portals, Naver and Daum (renamed as Kakao since its merger with Kakao), has contributed to the establishment of a large labor pool, aggregating audiences and ensuring the swift growth of the Webtoon industry. These portals are the equivalent of Google and Bing in South Korea, comprising not only search engines but also myriad services including the country’s most popular instant messaging app (KakaoTalk) and blog services (Naver Blog) among others. Thus, they have the capacity to shape South Korea’s digital ecology significantly (cf. Jin, 2017).

What are the consequences of this transformation whereby platforms are now regarded as central to creative industry? We argue that this development installed a new set of norms, with which amateurs, as well as professionals who previously worked with publishers, should comply to work as creative labor.<sup>7</sup> These norms also have practical consequences determining how Webtoonists might choose to work and grow. Unlike in the *manhwa* industry where creativity, artistry, and mastery were assumed to come from long-term practice and mentoring/discussions with senior comic artists and *dam-dang-ja*, most of the interviewees believed that an artist’s capacity to adapt to digitization would become a more important factor than analogue drawing skills, craftsmanship, and experience. Webtoon platforms do not necessarily have many technical restrictions, aside from regarding the width and resolution of images, and the requirement that images need to be arranged vertically for optimized online reading. Therefore, each Webtoonist needs to address how

the composition of their images might appear to an audience, but, as indicated by Bo-Ra, everyone has different ways of arranging their compositions:

There are no rules in Webtoon. There is no standard way of directing it, so I have to study on my own. When I debuted on Daum I asked other Webtoonists [about how they draw], and all our production processes varied. (Bo-Ra, personal communication, 30 June 2015)

When responding, many interviewees revealed that a new set of norms, such as “self-study,” had become critical for working as a Webtoonist. It also emerged that most Webtoonists are increasingly accustomed to working alone. We will return to this point later, but it should be noted that this new working culture is contrary to that in the *manhwa* industry, where junior artists normally worked *collectively* with assistants, senior artists, and *dam-dang-ja*. Even though there are now several Korean colleges and universities (e.g., Chungkang College of Cultural Industries, Sejong University) providing curricula to teach Webtoon production techniques, many Webtoonists still begin their careers as amateurs while also working at their main job. Moreover, the degree of diversity in their drawing styles, modes of presentation, and storytelling are *so great* that no commonly accepted way of creating a Webtoon is evident. As a result, there has been a shift in the way Webtoonists *relate to* platforms, as the working style of independent sole proprietors has to be normalized. Unlike many previous comic artists who tend to work long-term for a *manhwa* magazine, Webtoonists do not display loyalty to a single platform, often working across various platforms. Occasionally, they might even withdraw from a platform to migrate to another if they feel dissatisfied with their treatment.

Some of the interviewees who had previously worked in the *manhwa* industry noted that upon joining the platform, everyone was expected to play by new rules, such as applying the self-disciplined process of Webtoon production, and receiving no compensation for the content they create (unless officially commissioned by the platform). Meanwhile, the platforms further boost competition among “proprietors” by operating a form of three-tier competition: Webtoons are all first uploaded onto the “basic tier,” and then some qualify for the “second tier” following the competition. Some differences exist regarding the terms and conditions set by each platform, and the exact criteria for promotion to higher tiers is usually not transparent. Nevertheless, according to our interviewees, the most important barometer is generally considered “popularity” as evaluated by view counts, number of subscribers, and ratings from readers (ranging from 1 star [*bad*] to 5 stars [*good*]). A handful of Webtoonists from the second tier are, on an irregular basis, assessed according to each platform’s criteria, and eventually commissioned and paid to serialize their Webtoons for the most prestigious tier, the contributions to which feature on the main page of the web portals.

Reaching this point, it is possible to be swept away by neo-Schumpeterian rhetoric that suggests platform technology has enabled a new innovative *competition-based* model of comic production, and so technological shift is at the root of economic growth in the Webtoon industry. However, this view mystifies the role of platforms as “hands-off,” ‘impartial’ hosts (Gillespie, 2017), failing to account for the shifting ways in which cultural content creates surplus value for platforms (Kostakis & Bauwens, 2014). Although most Webtoons are available free-of-charge, they allocate ads on each Webtoon page, to generate profit from pre- or post-paid ‘ad impressions’, that is, they receive money from advertisers relating to the number of adverts “fetched” when each Webtoon episode is clicked on. Webtoons from the highest tier are generally expected to receive a minimum of 400,000 clicks per episode (Park, 2009, p. 145), and so constitute the main engine of these platforms’ profitability. However, much less well-recognized is the fact that Webtoons *beyond* the top tier still contribute to profitability in the same way, despite “receiving no compensation,” as Hee-Jin among other interviewees noted.

This changing structure of profit-generation in the platform context has attracted a deluge of criticism, holding that the competition-based model benefits only a few “winners” in the top tier at the expense of the time, labor, and passion of a much greater number of Webtoonists from the basic and second tiers (KOCCA, 2016b, pp. 17-21). For this reason, several critics have argued that the new digital environments of cultural production demand a more critical examination than previously, because they have extended, *prima facie*, democratizing approaches to everyone, to the extent that everybody is now free to engage in cultural production (Terranova, 2000).

The following two sections will first view the consequences of the new cultural production model from the perspective of political economists, as a means to explore the extent to which the platformization of the Webtoon industry echoes concerns about the potential exploitation of creative labor, and the asymmetrical power relations between the platforms and Webtoonists. We will then go on to explicate why this perspective does not fully account for the changing nature of creative labor, or the intricate relationship to platforms and audiences within the context of platformization.

### Be Creative—for Platforms?

Film and drama adaptations of well-known Webtoons represent a lucrative business avenue in South Korea. For instance, *The Moss*, a 2010 film based on the Webtoon by Yoon Tae-Ho, secured box-office success by attracting 3.4 million viewers and recording an estimated profit of US\$18 million. More recently, *Love Alarm*, a popular romance Webtoon by Chon Kye-young, was announced as part of the 2019 Netflix Originals, the popularity of which are growing worldwide. A small number of “star Webtoonists” have thus earned a huge

quantity of income: the most renowned already receive an average monthly salary of more than US\$15,000 from the platforms,<sup>8</sup> making additional profits from selling the copyright for their works to major entertainment studios that have adapted Webtoons into other cultural commodities. According to government research, copyright sales of Korean Webtoons are currently estimated to account for 18.8% of the country’s entire comic market,<sup>9</sup> demonstrating the value of increasing the adoption of “one source for multi-use” strategy in South Korean creative industries.

It is in this respect Webtoons have been deemed by the South Korean government to be at the core of future Korean cultural content, and a driver of Korean Wave 3.0, with the potential to create wealth, jobs, and added value across the creative industries (KOCCA, 2013). This governmental view has had a profound impact on the current structure of Webtoon platforms, affording them the potential to become a cultural industry utilizing platform technology. For instance, in 2013, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism announced a funding plan of US\$4.65 million supporting the ecology of cultural production and creativity, with a focus on cultivating talents in the Webtoon industry. They have also provided various forms of assistance, such as setting up additional small- and medium-sized Webtoon platforms. Thus, unlike in the case of the general political economy of mass media, which has enacted media censorship and regulation, the South Korean government has served as a financial sponsor and institutional backer of the Webtoon industry. As a result, Webtoon platforms have become established as an industry in their own right, at the forefront of cultural production, “actively searching and directly employing the content creators” (KOCCA, 2013) and surpassing the conventional *manhwa* industry. Moreover, these platforms have derived from the *manhwa* industry the format of amateur-only competition, reinventing this to fit with the platform-based ecology of cultural production, whereby *everybody*—both professionals and amateurs—competes against one another.

However, as McRobbie (2016) documented convincingly, in most creative industries very few individuals become successful enough to receive adulation, and even fewer become financially prosperous. Indeed, with precarious forms of employment that fall under the banner of creativity, there often lies high risk borne by the workers themselves, which eventually leads to the intensification of neoliberal governance.

Webtoons are no exception, and the “self-study” several interviewees referred to was seen as a form of free, extra labor, in an extremely competitive environment, where, for instance, the opportunity to sell copyright was limited to those who are famous and popular—only 1.8% of all Webtoonists gain the majority of their annual earnings from selling copyright (KOCCA, 2018, p. 75). In the case of Naver Webtoon, approximately 120,000 amateurs uploaded their content on basic and second tiers every month; however,

only 0.03% of them go on to be commissioned by the platform (DIGIECO, 2013, p. 15). Moreover, according to many of the interviewees, the average monthly compensation for amateurs' work is set at around US\$360: a figure that falls far below the minimum wage. Thus, some scholars argue that the working and living conditions of the majority of Webtoonists remain exploitative and precarious (Jin, 2015, p. 201).

There is no compensation for the episodes that were drawn over the course of the competition [in the basic and second tiers]. Even in the case of the Webtoonist who won the competition like myself, the platform does not reflect the popularity (during the competition) when it comes to budgeting the cost for our work. The problem is that Webtoonists do not share such problems with each other because we do not have any chance to communicate. The platform doesn't like it, to be honest. (Jin-Ah, personal communication, 8 June 2015)

Given that virtually all Webtoons fuel the popularity and profitability of Webtoon platforms, there has been some concern about the destructive consequences of mass amateurization for Webtoonists. Amateur Webtoonists' works are often regarded as "(work) volunteerism" and so their contribution is not given adequate weight, even though they "take pride in developing their skills" and are willing to develop their effort into a career (van Dijck, 2009, p. 51). Others have interpreted this phenomenon more critically (Jin, 2015; Song, 2012) as representative of a new movement of "digital capitalism," which seeks to colonize all the domains of Webtoon-related activities *in extenso*. In truth, capitalist colonization of cultural production is not unusual in many creative industries, as illustrated by some recent insightful works on the exploitation of quasi-labor or "playbour" on digital platforms (Fuchs, 2017; Scholz, 2013).

Moreover, it is significant that platforms still have the power to choose which Webtoons need to be commissioned. Generally, when making such decisions, popularity is considered the most decisive factor, that is, the most popular Webtoons with the largest number of view counts, votes, ratings, and so on get promoted. However, this is not necessarily always the case, and thus there has been some controversy regarding the transparency of competitions, especially on the second tiers of most platforms. For instance, in the case of Line Webtoon, operated by the Line Corporation that is a Japan-based subsidiary of Naver, promotion criteria include "professionalism" that equates to what the Line Webtoon editorial team "just find[s] exceedingly enjoyable!" ("Line Webtoon—How to Discover," 2016a). Similarly, according to Yoon-Ah, whose Webtoon now features on the Naver Webtoon's top tier, Webtoon platforms select winners informally and irregularly, and this cannot be considered a "perfectly transparent way" or a "fair way to debut as a Webtoonist" (Yoon-Ah, personal communication, 7 April 2015).

This model of profit-generation, that is, through the *apparent* exploitation of a crowdsourced creative labor force

and artists' passion for greater recognition and success (by offering some tantalizing future reward) may appear to herald the emergence of a new hegemony, known as "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017) or "platform imperialism" (Jin, 2017). Webtoon platforms thus seem to enjoy their position of new centrality within the Webtoon industry, and the tension between the platforms and Webtoonists remains prevalent today.

## Crowdsourcing: A New Business Model on the Rise

However, whether such tension can be articulated solely in terms of a struggle or resistance by the powerless Webtoonists against powerful platforms is the question. If such unilateral exploitation exists, why would many un-commissioned amateurs continue to draw and upload their Webtoons? Are they all acting in pursuit of the faint hope of becoming a star Webtoonist? Indeed, concluding readily that every domain of amateur activity has been totally colonized and exploited by platforms with a view to creating profit, fails to acknowledge the shifting modes of cultural production, and does not answer the above question.

Let us consider some recent changes in the geography of Webtoon platforms, as triggered by the emergence of several small- and medium-sized Webtoon platforms. According to our interviewees Se-Hun and Su-Bin, those platforms have a more "creator-centred incubating policy," and actively scout for outstanding amateurs able to operate at the basic and second tiers of Daum and Naver, attempting to lure them with offers intended to (at least) double their income. The result of this change was outlined in Jin-Ah's comment:

Naver and Daum have been the strongest players in the Webtoon market. But now Lezhin [a medium-sized Webtoon platform] has come in, and Daum has already been screwed [financially], so the staff hate talking about it. Naver must also feel uneasy. They now have reasons to change (smile). (Jin-Ah, personal communication, 8 June 2015)

At this juncture, it is worth examining the *critical ambivalence* of free labor, to which Terranova aptly pointed. The growth in "free labour" in the digital context means not just "unwaged . . . and exploited" *but also* "voluntarily given and . . . enjoyed" (Terranova, 2000, p. 36). This is well instantiated by several interviewees' remarks, such as Tae-Ree's assertion that she draws Webtoons because she finds it "most fun and enjoyable" (Tae-Ree, personal communication, 29 June 2015), or Hee-Jin's statement that amateurs (and many professionals) draw Webtoons chiefly for the "pleasure of work" itself, rather than to attain economic compensation (Hee-Jin, personal communication, 23 June 2015). From this perspective, enjoyment is seen to constitute a pivotal aspect of Webtoonists' experiences, informing their motivation to participate in the Webtoon industry.

Furthermore, the “free” production of Webtoons is “endowed with a sense of autonomy” (Andrejevic, 2009, p. 416), as the artists *legally* own their cultural commodities. They own the intellectual property of their Webtoons, and are free to migrate to different platforms depending on the terms and conditions set. Platforms cannot wholly “control” Webtoons and Webtoonists in the platform ecology, as creative content is the substance and main engine of the economic model. Thus, they are far from being the “vectoralist class” (Wark, 2013) that controls the logistics of managing the material conditions of cultural production.

Naver and Daum Webtoons started introducing various creator-friendly policies around 2012, as a way to offer a more stable environment to Webtoonists, partly in response to the rise of alternative platforms and public criticism of Webtoonists’ working conditions.<sup>10</sup> For instance, those platforms increased the minimum monthly wage for all commissioned Webtoonists to US\$1,800, and in 2013, they launched “competitive compensation” programs such as the Page Profit Share (PPS) strategy, which maximizes the exposure of character products and paid content created by particular Webtoonists (KOCCA, 2016b, pp. 17-21) and gives 70% of the revenue generated to corresponding Webtoonists. Crucially, these leading platforms have also established means of compensation for amateur Webtoonists in the second tiers. For example, in Naver Webtoon’s second tier, amateur Webtoonists can insert “keyword-based adverts” within their Webtoon page, enabling them to choose a keyword that is relevant to each episode (e.g., food), and subsequently an advert that is pertinent to that keyword (e.g., a restaurant) appears at the bottom of the page. As a result, Webtoonists receive 50% of ad revenues, and can check the profitability and profit statistics for each advert themselves for future reference.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in 2016, Line Webtoon organized a crowdfunding program, through which audiences were able to donate certain amounts of money *directly* to amateur Webtoonists, to help to foster new talent and assist artists in monetizing their work more easily (“WEBTOON x Patreon for Monetization on Discover!” 2016b). Line, in this sense, acts as a financial mediator between Webtoonists and their fans-cum-donators.

Once again, these “competitive compensation” programs might imply that Webtoonists are satisfied with the re-calibration of their lives to align with “long-term expectations” (McRobbie, 2016), and pursuing the slim possibility that they will become a celebrity Webtoonist while living on enhanced compensation. However, such a view fails to account for the shifting mechanisms of cultural production exhibited by these changes, whereby content creators are a focal asset of the industry, and their wellbeing is the concern of emerging platform-based market systems, requiring them to be secured and protected to some degree to ensure the continuous production of cultural commodities. In terms of the relationship between platforms and Webtoonists, Webtoonists are understood to be “complementors” (Nieborg & Poell,

2018) to platforms, rather than subordinates, and are recognized and prioritized by the platforms for their pivotal role. Therefore, we see this shift less in terms of a hegemony of digital capitalist institutions, but rather as the “re-articulation” of actors, to enable them to fit with the new platform-centric economic configuration of the Webtoon industry.

Our findings also demonstrate that many Webtoonists actually appreciate, or even welcome, the new business model centered around the competition mechanism itself; as outlined by Su-Bin,

The platforms offer a low barrier to entry. Meanwhile . . . only those few who had already completed specialised training were able to apply to competitions in the old days. They must have expended a lot of energy in that, but we amateurs also do so. (Su-Bin, personal communication, 28 June 2015)

Given the positive perception of competition, and amateurs’ ability to benefit from the “low entry barrier” with enhanced opportunities to compete in the labor market, we observe that Webtoon platforms have adopted what we call “competition crowdsourcing,” whereby digital collaboration occurs in the format of idea contests. “Competition crowdsourcing” in this case study represents a prominent example of how crowdsourcing’s *prima facie* altruistic, volunteer-based approaches (as in Wikipedia) can be complicit in the logic of capital production, as cultural production processes on platforms have simultaneously become an amateur activity *and* virtual labor allowing products to be cashed in on. More importantly, this suggests the logic of competition *itself*, once thought to be exclusively relevant to professionals and experts, has extended into the domain of unpaid amateur labor, and so any meaningful act underlying the production of Webtoons cannot be separated from the dynamics of capital, regardless of what Webtoonists require, as the following quotation shows:

Once, a high-profile Webtoonist’s depression gained attention. She received psychiatric treatment for a while because of malicious comments [on her Webtoon]. As far as I know, she never wanted to be a professional Webtoonist. She just drew and posted some “cooking” Webtoons on her personal blog, but suddenly [as her Webtoon gained some popularity], one Webtoon platform hired her as a commissioned Webtoonist. After she started her job, she received massive attention, which soon became the major source of her stress. (Yon-Hee, personal communication, 24 June 2015)

With these potential challenges in mind, even the aforementioned possibility of switching platforms might represent an opportunity to successfully transform people’s creativity and ideas into a form of self-enhancing digital human capital. Put boldly, Webtoonists *can escape* from particular capitalist platforms, but *cannot evade* the platform-centric economic model on which “competition crowdsourcing” relies. Competition in this respect has become

more than an apparatus of capitalist exploitation, having grown into a systematized method of profit-generation in the Webtoon industry.

### Attention Economy: Crowdsourcing Evaluation

Taking the platform-centric configuration—not the platforms *themselves*—as the basis for Webtoon production, we should consider another key factor that determines the winners of “competition crowdsourcing,” and that, as such, contributes to the soaring market value of Webtoons: audiences. Attracting an audience is, needless to say, a key element in the success of any creative industry and business, and this has been especially true for Webtoons, which were first devised as a marketing strategy for web portals’ news services. Audience numbers are crucial, not least because their view counts, subscriptions, votes, ratings, comments and likes, together illustrate the popularity of a Webtoon.

A popularity vote itself is of course far from a new idea, as comic magazines, Billboard charts, and many other cultural intermediaries have long prioritized it. However, popularity measures assume a very different meaning in the Webtoon industry where the staff, who *still* make decisions about which Webtoons will be promoted and commissioned, usually have no expertise, unlike the *dam-dang-ja* working in the *manhwa* industry. Su-Bin’s answer to our question about platform staff’s experience confirms this lack of expertise:

They just happened to be assigned to the Webtoon team when they are hired. They are *just* employees in the IT sector . . . I think subculture geeks probably know much more about Webtoons. Worse, I heard there is a shortage of staff in the Webtoon team. My guy used to manage up to 40 or 50 Webtoonists by himself. (Su-Bin, personal communication, 28 June 2015)

This would explain why Webtoon platforms delegate the evaluation of Webtoons to the collective intelligence of the networked public, relying on the popularity of content as the chief yardstick when promoting Webtoons. It is also true that sometimes so-called “professionalism” makes up 30% of criteria (“Line Webtoon—How to Discover,” 2016a), while other platforms might also have similar standards. However, we might also ask how laypersons might judge Webtoons from a professional perspective. With, currently, little “standardised criteria” through which to evaluate a Webtoon (Park, 2009), it would not be wrong to assume that their criteria are not so much based on aesthetics, narrative, or drawing skills, but rather on what the Webtoon team finds fun and popular, enabling them to attract more users by delivering “user satisfaction.” For instance, according to some of our interviewees, Daum Webtoon pays its Webtoonists according to the outcome of a computer program that calculates several quantifiable aspects of the Webtoon, such as number of daily views.

This may still appear to be a more democratic and transparent approach than that in the *manhwa* industry, where comic experts exerted a great deal of power over the decision-making processes. However, such crowdsourcing of evaluation could become subject to “manipulation” by popular demands (van Dijck, 2009, p. 45), thereby complicating the (power) relationship between actors. Webtoons have become contingent on continuous repackaging and refashioning according to audience feedback (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 2). This is particularly the case in this industry where the metrics of popularity serve as a barometer, determining promotion to second/top tiers, or, for those already in the top tier, for potential adaptation into other media formats. Thus, these metrics constitute a key component of the profitability of both the platforms and the Webtoonists themselves. The following quotation illustrates how much value platforms place on the popularity of Webtoons:

Usually a Webtoonist working with one major platform renews their contract each season that consists of 25 episodes. According to that platform, by so doing Webtoonists will feel less tired and take a better rest between each season, and they will be able to work more efficiently (sneering). But the real purpose [of this system] is to lay off Webtoonists if their Webtoons become less popular. This is such a good excuse for dismissal. (Su-Bin, personal communication, 28 June 2015)

The road to success for a Webtoonist, therefore, involves taming “the whims of a crowdsourced public” (Trammell, 2015, p. 64) by heeding not only what platforms do but also audiences’ reactions, and the level of attention manifested by the metrics. However, any increase in the total number of Webtoons inevitably minimizes the degree and scope of attention drawn to each particular one, as “the sum total of human attention is necessarily limited and therefore scarce” (Goldhaber, 2006). Furthermore, audience attention is a gradually depleting resource that might create conflict between competing parties aiming to mine additional resources (Terranova, 2012, pp. 2-3), which, in the case of Webtoons, means more clicks, likes, views, and subscribers.

From this perspective, let us re-consider the meaning of “competitive compensation” strategies, as mentioned in the previous section. PPS, keyword-based adverts, and direct donations were initially launched with the purpose of purveying a more stable environment for cultural production by allowing Webtoonists to “cash in on” audiences’ reactions. However, this implies that “attention” itself has become a form of capital, on which the economic success of both the platforms and Webtoonists rely. Therefore, both platforms and Webtoonists share the objective of seeking audience attention, and, as such, the relationship between them becomes an “obligatorily symbiotic,” one that observes the logic of the “attention economy” (Goldhaber, 2006; Terranova, 2012), holding that the economic value of rewards should be configured by the amount of attention directed to the product. Compensation strategies in this light are not a



neutral or impartial system of economic reward, but neither are they simply a means to attract Webtoonists. Rather, they are designed to invite and shape participation to attain particular ends (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013).

In addition, it is worth remembering that these metrics are publicly visible barometers for popularity, and a direct proxy for whether or not a Webtoonist is qualified enough to be successful. This may steer Webtoonists' behavior in a direction that aligns with popular demand and trends. Although this is not an entirely new phenomenon, as the *manhwa* industry always heeded continuous audience feedback to gauge the success and popularity of content and concomitantly modified it if needed, the publicly visible and real-time changing metrics of the Webtoon platforms might accelerate such a tendency, and contribute to further quantifying varied definitions of success that were previously measured qualitatively (Illouz, 2007, p. 30). Considering that these "attentional assemblages" (Terranova, 2012, p. 2) have come to characterize Webtoon platforms, both the platforms and Webtoonists themselves are likely to be obliged to heed the visualized index of popularity of Webtoons, and to try to sell and brand these cultural commodities accordingly. There is also a high likelihood that Webtoonists, especially those not yet commissioned, are aiming to establish an identity as producers of a self-organizing commercial project, with a view to securing greater attention instead of relying too much on the outcome of competition.

### *Dilemma of the Lonely Craftsman*

Such orientation toward attaining greater attention as key resource for success reminds us of the behaviors of artists that routinely "self-entrepreneurialise," constantly reflecting on the processes and expectations surrounding their own creative activities, so as to "command the attention of so many" (McRobbie, 2016, pp. 82-83). This strategy is, however, in direct contrast to the definition of the amateur as a "lover of" a particular activity, able to preserve that love "without the spirit of . . . competition" (Barthes, 1977, p. 52), and so who "does not make himself heard" (Barthes, 1977, p. 52). Conversely, we witness what Berardi (2009) called "the progressive mentalisation of working process, and the consequent enslavement of the soul" (p. 24), which aligns Webtoonists with the new subjectivation of creative labor. This new subject seeks to self-promote, while simultaneously being constantly aware of the public gaze and engaging in self-protection, as Bo-Ra outlined:

When I had just won [the competition], I anticipated no difficulties. Once I started serialising on the top league, I realised there were loads of them. I could draw anything I liked before I won. But after that, I had to consider the public, and couldn't draw something that might harm readers' feelings, to avoid any issues or disputes. You know, there are all sorts of people on the Internet, so I have to be very careful. In my

Webtoons, there isn't any strong opinion. (Bo-Ra, personal communication, 30 June 2015)

Therefore, the platform-centric configuration of the Webtoon industry prioritizes attention, thereby spawning a form of neoliberal self-governance that is facilitated by the tantalizing promise of economic reward. Therefore, enhancing rewards *themselves* would not radically improve the situation, in which the meaningful processes of cultural content production have been redefined already within the context of platformization. Worse still, Webtoonists are doomed to be attention-seekers, but according to several interviewees, the platforms scarcely protect them from the negative consequences of attention-seeking, which sometimes even extends to include their communications with audience members:

The traps are in the word "communication" [which Webtoon emphasises as its key feature]. At first, I enjoyed communicating with my readers. I loved replying to positive comments . . . But there came a moment when such communication turned into poison. For example, readers told me not to use social media and instead spend the time to draw more Webtoons. Some told me to meet a deadline . . . maybe it's better to stop using social media (laugh). (Mi-Soo, personal communication, 8 June 2015)

Physical and emotional stress can result from directly communicating with audiences through comments and emails, especially when addressing aggressive, hostile, or malicious feedback, hate comments, and even cyber-bullying and stalking. For this reason, the majority of interviewees expressed some reluctance in relation to revealing personal details or issues. This leads us to ask: how self-protection and self-promotion can be compatible? Bo-Ra and Mi-Soo answered the question as above, by adopting a new identity, wherein a public persona, who recognizes the risks and uncertainty involved in self-promotion, can also exercise damage control. Fears about precariousness and suffering under neoliberal working conditions are neither exclusive to the Webtoon industry nor unbeknown to the public, although the adoption of new identity within an unwritten job description *is*.

Some interviewees mentioned the recent establishment of the Webtoonists' Trade Union, which intends to provide emotional and legal support to Webtoonists. However, as Jin-Ah stated above, Webtoon platforms and their employees remain unenthusiastic about Webtoonists sharing their problems with one another, and so there is little in the way of systematically organized support regarding these matters at the institutional level. Moreover, with competition taking place online, in public, such unwritten job descriptions apply not merely to established Webtoonists, but to *everyone*—regardless of the type of tier in which they work, and independently of whether or not they are qualified professionals working under a legal contract agreement. Thus, the relationship between Webtoonists and platforms is more complex than that between a sole proprietor and their contractors. As

virtually all our interviewees mentioned, Webtoonists are currently, or started out as, amateurs, but they face pressure to work in a professional manner, and manage their identity. This “ambiguous position” (Jung-Hwa, personal communication, 23 June 2015) forces them to oscillate endlessly between the statuses of amateur and professional.

## Conclusion

This article has illustrated how the introduction of platforms and the centrality of the Webtoon industry have given birth to a new economic model for cultural production, which centers around “competition crowdsourcing,” the shifting nature of (free) labor, and popularity metrics. Although technology-driven innovation might appear to have propelled this restructuring of the Webtoon industry, we adopted a more critical perspective considering platforms as complex socio-technical assemblages that “shape,” rather than convey or facilitate, the performance of social and cultural acts in the creative industries (van Dijck, 2013, p. 29). In light of this, demonstrating the basic parameters that guide the production of creative cultural content, and shifting labor models and norms as well as the consequences of doing so, warrants a broader scope that makes explicit the ramifications about platformization playing out across a much more extensive terrain of cultural production. Thus, in exploring how the practices of cultural production and the specificity of creative labor have become attuned to the routinized use of platforms and to the *de facto* standards set, we have taken into account the overall transformation of the Webtoon industry.

The developments following platformization we discussed above are based on a particular case study of cultural goods: Webtoons in South Korea. We aimed to fill the gap in the extant literature relating to the ramifications of platformization in non-Western contexts. For instance, we showed how the platformization of the Webtoon industry demonstrates a “winner-takes-all” effect and renders the cultural product more susceptible to platforms—but in a manner that differs slightly from that of popular Western equivalents. Meanwhile, equally important was that we sought to tease out further critical contributions to the understanding of platformization in general, together with other articles in this special collection. As digital platforms are increasingly becoming ubiquitous and assuming importance with transformative consequences for numerous domains in our lives, it has become urgent to uncover the processes whereby these transformations are not simply extending but also complicating the nature of existing concerns, such as labor exploitation and leveraging the creativity of individuals.

Placing our emphasis on a platform-centric model is not intended to suggest that those issues are negligible or secondary; we showed how appropriation of creative labor is still manifest and sometimes leads to an intensified neoliberal governance and spawns a new “creative precariat” (McRobbie, 2016). However, as our findings also confirmed, the platformization of the Webtoon industry entailed further

changes in the socio-technical organization of cultural production, business practices, and the nature of the relationship between involved actors, in ways that brought new nuances to the ongoing issues and sometimes enhanced opportunities for creative labor. Failing to consider this broad restructuring of the industry suggests that we lack a basic tool for further analysis of those issues, both existing and emerging within the context of the increasingly platformized cultural production. Following in the tradition of cultural production studies, we hope that our findings will motivate further studies of Webtoons, and that our framework will provide an analytical prism for future evaluations of the impact of platformization on digital labor beyond a particular context.

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## ORCID iDs

Ji-Hyeon Kim  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6452-8467>

Jun Yu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6178-3764>

## Notes

1. The Korean Wave (Hallyu) is a neologism referring to the increase in global popularity of South Korean culture since the 1990s, in the form of pop culture, entertainment, music, TV dramas and movies, and Webtoon.
2. This structure resembles professional sports leagues using a promotion (but not relegation) system.
3. Since April 2019, the Naver Webtoon app has been adapted to allow users to watch competitions on the app and give ratings to Webtoons in the second tier, but not for Webtoons in the basic tier. Nothing has been changed on the Daum Webtoon app to date (May 2019).
4. We suggest “quasi-” because, as we shall show later, the platforms’ decision to commission is made chiefly based on users’ positive feedback and ratings, view counts, votes, and so on.
5. All interviews were conducted in Korean, audio-recorded, and transcribed and translated into English by the authors. Interviewees’ names are changed for confidentiality.
6. This was published in 2018 at Goldsmiths, University of London, and the project met with the approval of the Goldsmiths Research Ethics Committee. All participants signed an informed consent and agreed to use of their interview data for research purposes.
7. Exceptionally, some renowned comic artists started publishing their Webtoons on the top tier from the outset. Yet, this happened in incredibly rare cases, and, according to our interviewees, the majority of professionals who formerly worked with publishers and/or received vocational training still have to begin at the basic tier.
8. See “Naver Webtoonists’ Average Monthly Salary” (2018).
9. See “Webtoons: Blessing or Curse?” (2013).

10. For instance, in 2011 *The Korean Economic Daily* published an article titled “400,000 Won Cartoonists,” in which two anonymous Webtoonists working with Naver and Daum Webtoons cited poor working conditions that prevent them from making a living as a Webtoonist.
11. See “Naver Enhances ‘PPS’ Programme to Increase Webtoonists’ Profit” (2015).

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## Author Biographies

Ji-Hyeon Kim has recently completed her PhD in Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, where she works as an associate lecturer. Her interests include creative labor, amateur production, political economy of media industry, and digital economy.

Jun Yu is a PhD candidate in media and communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His interests include social theories, solidarity, privacy and dataveillance, datafied education, and the social consequences of platformization and algorithmic culture.