CONTENT

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONTENT IN A DIGITAL ERA

Like water or air, content is ubiquitous. But unlike these natural elements, content can't be easily defined. After all, content doesn't have any notable characteristics. Perhaps more important, unlike water and air—at least, clean water and breathable air—which are both depleting resources, content is not at risk. In the twenty-first century, content appears to possess infinite potential to keep expanding. But if content is as ubiquitous as it appears to be, what is it, and what are the parameters of the industry that supports its growth and seems to know no bounds?

Defining Content in a Digital Era

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, content is "that which is contained in anything." Logically, then, *content*

can refer to socks in a drawer, books in a box, or sand in an hourglass. But none of these material objects are of concern in the content industry. By default, in the content industry, *content* implicitly points to digital, not physical, materials. But still, little consensus exists about what the term means, even in this more narrowly defined context. The second edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of the Internet* defines *content* as "The information found in a Web site and the way in which it is structured." Similarly, Merriam-Webster's defines *content* as "the principal substance (such as written matter, illustrations, or music) offered by a website." While these two definitions are partially correct, neither is sufficiently inclusive.

First, digital content is no longer, strictly speaking, found only on websites. After all, mobile apps such as Snapchat and Instagram also generate and circulate content. Second, eliding *content* with *information* is misleading. Information is generally equated with imparting knowledge, but as anyone who has ever spent time online appreciates, a lot of content in circulation doesn't impart any knowledge at all. To illustrate, consider the case of the "Instagram egg."

In early 2019, the most-liked image on Instagram was a digital photograph of a brown egg on a white background. As of March 2019, the egg (originally just a stock photo) had already accrued more than 50 million likes. While the egg, which would eventually be widely known as the Instagram

egg, certainly constitutes content, can it be easily classified as information or knowledge? Since it was circulating on Instagram solely for the purpose of becoming the most-liked image on the social media platform and not to convey a message or share information or tell a story of any kind, the egg arguably reveals a great deal about the essence of content in a digital era. Certainly, some content does convey a message, share information, or tell a story, but content isn't obliged to fulfill any of these goals. Content, as demonstrated by the Instagram egg, may circulate solely for the purpose of circulating. What has changed with the arrival of the content industry is both simple and significant.

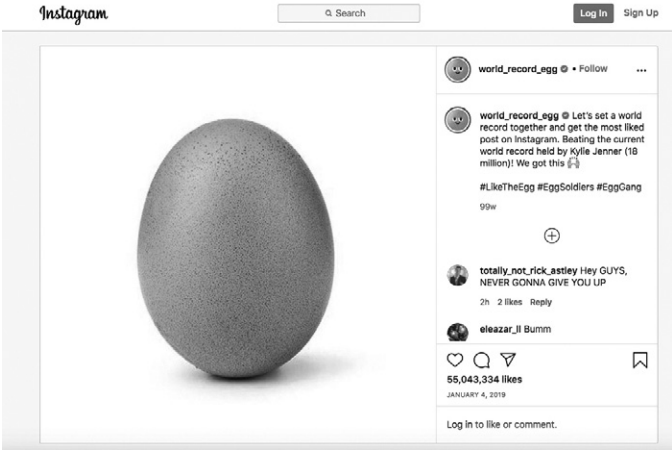

Figure 1 The "Instagram egg," posted by @world_record_egg in early 2019.

As political scientist Jodi Dean argues in *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*, in a digital era, "the exchange value of messages overcomes their use value." In other words, messages are no longer primarily sent from senders to receivers. Part of a circulating stream of data, a message's particular content is irrelevant, but so is the need that it be received. As Dean notes, "The only thing that is relevant is circulation, the addition to the pool."[1] Hence the existence of the Instagram egg. The Instagram egg could have been a kitten or blender or hockey stick, and anyone could have sent or liked the image. What mattered was not what the Instagram egg had to communicate or to whom but that it was circulating at all, and this is arguably what makes the Instagram egg such an exemplary example of content.

The Instagram egg may be notorious, but it is not an outlier. Indeed, in many respects, it epitomizes content—the raw material of the content industry. What made the Instagram egg stand out wasn't what it communicated but rather what it did, and what it did was simply circulate widely. This is precisely why economist Bharat Anand, author of *The Content Trap*, argues that in an age of content, the most successful companies aren't those that produce or sell great content but rather those that simply facilitate its management or circulation.[2] This focus is what seems to separate content and the content industry from earlier

forms of cultural erosion. One might ask, after all, aren't content and the content industry simply an extension of a culture industry that has existed since at least the rise of mass media? Like the culture industry described in disparaging terms by critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the late 1940s, the content industry is also an industry defined by repetition—one where "characteristic innovations are never anything more than improvements of mass reproduction" and consumers are "directed to the technique, and not to the contents—which are stubbornly repeated, outworn, and by now half-discredited."[3] Of course, in the culture industry described by Adorno and Horkheimer, amusement and entertainment still existed. Even if trite and trivial, or worse yet, dangerously merging the boundary between culture and pure amusement, the images in circulation were still doing and communicating something. Can the same be said of the Instagram egg? Again, the Instagram egg isn't culture or amusement or even an advertisement for eggs.

If one takes the Instagram egg as a sort of quintessential example of content—something that circulates for the sake of circulation—one key question remains, which is why and how nearly everything that circulates digitally came to be known as *content*? Before the rise of the content industry, content already had a specific meaning in both legal discourses (specifically, in relation to copyright law) and marketing. To fully appreciate how the concept

became so widely adopted and eventually accrued its current connotations, we need to investigate the term's slow but steady uptake in the 1990s to early 2000s.

The Rise of the Content Industry

The first reference to the content industry in the *New York Times* appeared in a 1998 article by William Safire. In "The Summer of This Content," Safire observes, "If any word in the English language is hot, buzzworthy and finger-snappingly with-it, surpassing even millennium in both general discourse and insider-ese, that word is content." Safire's article goes on to offer a short history of content and the content industry, beginning with John P. Noon's decision to trademark the term *content* in 1991. According to Safire, Noon decided to trademark the term because his enterprise, Content World Publishing, was planning to launch a new magazine called *Content* that, in Noon's words, would be "geared toward people in the content industry" and explore "how different types of content can make it into digital media."[4]

If Noon's mandate to explore "how different types of content can make it into digital media" sounds vague, it likely reflects the fact that in 1991 few people had any reference point for digital media, let alone content. But this is not surprising. The first web browser launched in 1990,

but it would take several years for anything resembling the modern web to even begin to take form.

Sadly, Noon was detrimentally ahead of his time. In 1991, little market existed for a magazine targeting the content industry. Even a decade later, when Noon launched the Content World Trade Show, the industry was still in a nascent form. While Noon's trade show initially attracted over a thousand attendees, by July 2004 *Computer World* reported that the trade show had been canceled due to declining interest and attendance. The same article reported that Noon was selling off many of his content-related assets, which included the Content.net and Contentmanagement.com domains. Ironically, just as Noon was winding down the Content World Trade Show and selling off his domains, the content industry he had envisioned in the early 1990s was about to explode.

To be clear, the content industry—an umbrella term for all types of companies in the business of owning or providing digital content of any kind, from text publications to music to movies—was already taking shape in the 1990s. However, the growth of an industry that rests on the creation and circulation of content was initially slowed by several factors.

Inadequate Search Engines

In an era when *search* was not yet synonymous with *Google*, many search engines were available (e.g., AltaVista, Ask

Jeeves, Excite, Lycos, and WebCrawler), but they were semifunctional at best. One could put content online, but there was no obvious way to ensure it would ever be found.

Limited File-Sharing Options and Slow Internet Speeds

Unless you were an established media outlet with many resources, throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the types of content you could share online were limited. Without platforms like YouTube and Vimeo, for example, sharing video files was phenomenally difficult. Without affordable website development platforms, such as WordPress, even building a website and posting textual content online generally required a lot of time and expertise. But as a wider variety of content started to appear online, including streamed music and videos, other technical challenges remained. In the 1990s, most people still relied on dial-up internet. At top speeds, dial-up could stream about 56 kilobytes per second. As a result, early web users often spent a lot of time just waiting for basic websites to load. Downloading any type of file with more information—for example, a video—would have been impossible, or at least extremely onerous. With a maximum download speed of 56 kilobytes per second, it would take over a week to download an average-length feature film. Thus, even in the early 2000s, the types of content one could easily post and put into circulation were limited at best.

Limited User-Generated Content

Another factor that limited the content industry's growth in the 1990s was the small amount of user-generated content. While such content existed in the 1990s, it was available on a much smaller scale than today. In the early years of the web, GeoCities (1995) offered a somewhat clunky but possible way to build and launch a personal website, though users needed at least a basic knowledge of HTML to use the platform. Later, both Blogger (1999) and LiveJournal (1999) launched to offer more accessible ways for people to share their ideas online, even if they didn't know how to code a site. But in the early days of GeoCities, Blogger, and LiveJournal, user-generated content was limited. Platforms that would later facilitate the production and circulation of user-generated content in other mediums (e.g., video-sharing sites such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Flickr) had yet to launch in the 1990s.

Restricted Ability to Work and Hire Remotely

At this time, producing content generally required hiring individuals with the skills to do so. Finding a few local skilled workers has always been easy, while finding hundreds or thousands of skilled workers has always necessitated casting one's search wider. Hiring far-flung employees with the needed skills was difficult in the 1990s to early 2000s because the conditions and platforms that

would eventually support the massive expansion of remote work and online hiring—including online work collaboration tools such as Dropbox and Google Docs, and online hiring recruitment sites, including Elance and ODesk (now Upwork)—did not yet exist.

Limited Opportunities for Monetization

One of the main reasons the content industry didn't immediately explode as the web expanded was economic. Until the early 2000s, if domain owners wanted to run advertisements on their website, they had to sell advertising space. The process was similar to that of selling advertising space in a print publication; the only difference was that rather than selling a block of a printed page, what was now up for grabs was a bit of space on a website. Of course, in the early years of the web, domain owners needed the resources and staff to go out and attract potential advertisers in order to sell any advertising space. As a result, even if a domain owner could generate a lot of content, finding ways to make a site generate revenue remained a challenge and was only truly possible for established content providers such as large newspapers and existing media companies.

Around 2004, just as Noon appeared to be throwing in the towel, a convergence of new technologies, platforms, and products created the conditions needed for the content industry to finally expand.

Content Became Searchable

Until at least the early 2000s, the web was a rapidly evolving space but one with a chronic problem—it was an ever-expanding repository of information with no efficient search function. In 1994, the editors of *Postmodern Culture*, one of the first academic journals to start publishing on the web, were concerned enough about this new medium to warn their readers that venturing onto the web, which had grown from an estimated 100 sites in June to over 600 sites by December 1993, may result in "a kind of informational vertigo."[5] While this warning may now strike readers as hilarious, it is worth noting that for much of the 1990s, finding anything on the web was a problem. It would take nearly a decade for this problem to resolve. As search engines were refined and became more functional, however, the drive to "game the system" also increased. And more individuals and organizations started to produce content for the web that had one sole purpose: to rank high in any search. So-called discoverability came to dictate why a lot of content was being produced.

Internet Speeds Accelerated

Just as finding content got a lot easier, internet speeds started to speed up. A Pew Research Center study found that in 2000, about half of US adults were online, but only 3 percent had broadband access—the other 97 percent were still using dial-up. Dial-up usage peaked a couple of

years later, but by 2003 to 2004, dial-up was in a steady and rapid decline as both new and established users embraced high-speed alternatives.[6] Accelerated internet speeds allowed people to access more content more quickly. Whether this increased the desire for content is unclear, but faster internet speeds certainly made accessing content online less tedious. Eventually, the event of "going online" would become a seamlessly integrated practice of everyday life.

Content Diversified

While the web was at first a primarily text-based medium, as internet speeds increased, music-sharing sites such as Napster and video-sharing sites such as YouTube were launched, diversifying the type of content available. Increasingly, the web was also where one went to share photographs, videos, and music files.

The Era of Social Media Arrived

In the early 2000s, social media expanded beyond the handful of sites such as GeoCities, Blogger, and LiveJournal. In the span of five years, dozens of major social media sites—some still in existence and others now defunct—appeared, including MySpace (2003), Del.icio.us (2003), Flickr (2004), Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter (2006), and Tumblr (2007). During these years, user-

generated content and the content industry started to grow at an unprecedented rate.

Simultaneous to these technological changes, which essentially helped make the production and sharing of digital content easier and more accessible to a wider range of users, three other important things happened.

The Rise of Remote Work and the Gig Economy

First, in the late 1990s to early 2000s, the way we work went through a radical shift. For example, remote hiring sites such as Elance (1999) and ODesk (2003) appeared, enabling employers to hire workers en masse. Employers in developed nations were able to more easily outsource large-scale programming, web development, and content production projects to people anywhere in the world, including in emerging economies where highly skilled labor can often can be accessed at a fraction of the cost. During this period, online collaborative working tools also started to emerge to make remote work—and even remote collaborative projects—easier. These tools included Writely, which was launched by Upstartle in 2005, but within a year was acquired by Google and relaunched as Google Docs.

The Automation of Advertising

In 2004, Google launched a new vertical product that would transform advertising by enabling anyone who owned a

domain and had a website with at least some content to generate income via automatically placed advertisements. Known as AdSense, the product was arguably the single most important factor in the content industry's expansion in the first decade of the new millennium (as discussed in chapter 3). With AdSense, the more content one had on a website, the more money one could make. Hence, at least for web entrepreneurs, the need for content, especially original *search-engine-optimized* content, soared.

Hardware Companies Started Using Free Content to Drive Sales

Finally, in the early 2000s, tech companies started to use content—namely, free content—to drive the sales of new products. After all, would smart phones have taken off as quickly as they did if there wasn't a lot of free content available online? Would many people have felt compelled to purchase a Blackberry or iPhone in 2008 if most of the content online was behind a paywall? Free content became essential to creating a perceived need for everything from smart phones to tablets to portable computers. Simply put, content created needs that might never have existed otherwise.

So, what is the content industry? In essence, it is an industry that generates revenue from the production and/or circulation of content alone. The content in question

sometimes conveys information, tells a story, or entertains, but it doesn't need to do any of these things to circulate effectively as content (again, consider the Instagram Egg). While some content is produced by paid workers, much of the content that generates income in the industry is user-generated (produced for free by users). While the content industry may be a relatively new phenomenon—one conceived of as the internet started to enter our everyday lives in the 1990s and fully realized in the first decade of the new millennium—a few theorists saw it coming as early as the 1970s.

Predictions about the Rise of the Content Industry

The content industry existed as a possibility long before it was established or named. Philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer saw the writing on the wall in the late 1940s. They argued at the time that the culture industry's content was already "merely a faded foreground." When one encounters the culture industry's content, such as a typical Hollywood film, what sinks in isn't a specific image or message but rather "the automated succession of standardized operations." For Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry's content was monotonous—an example of the rhythm of the factory floor invading culture. In their essay "The Culture Industry," Adorno and

Horkheimer accurately foresaw the growing entanglement between the culture and advertising industries and the negative consequences of this convergence.[7] What they didn't fully foresee is the extent to which the culture industry's products wouldn't simply mirror the monotonous rhythms of the factory floor but would become its raw material.

The earliest and arguably most accurate anticipation of something resembling the contemporary content industry was articulated over twenty-five years later by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. While serving as a visiting researcher at the University of Montreal in the late 1970s, Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (published in 1979). *The Postmodern Condition* was a "report" in the traditional sense, as it was commissioned by the Conseil des universités du Québec; we might presume it was one of the conditions of Lyotard's visiting professorship. What Lyotard produced wasn't just another report destined to rot away in a government filing cabinet; *The Postmodern Condition* helped define the postmodern era. Specifically, the report laid the groundwork for understanding the status of knowledge in computerized societies.

While Lyotard never used the term *content industry* in his report and never even adopted the term *content* to describe digital information, he more or less accurately forecast the rise of the content industry. To begin, he observed that technological transformations—by which he

was primarily referring to computerization—"can be expected to have a considerable impact on knowledge." He observed, "Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its 'use-value.'" Not only did Lyotard anticipate an era in which knowledge would lose its "use-value" and exist only to be exchanged, but he also accurately predicted "that the nation-states will one day fight for control of information, just as they battled in the past for control over territory."[8]

In the context of his discussion, Lyotard further predicted that as knowledge becomes an "informational commodity," the dichotomy between knowledge and ignorance would also break down. In its wake, we would witness a new divide—the difference between *payment knowledge* and *investment knowledge*. Payment knowledge, he suggested, will be exchanged for pure survival (i.e., for consumption), while investment knowledge will be exchanged to optimize the performance of other endeavors. In today's data-driven culture, payment knowledge is arguably the type of data we share on a daily basis to carry out quotidian tasks—for example, entering a building or logging into an online bank account. Investment knowledge refers to all the other data we exchange on a daily basis (e.g., the data we share when we decide to use a fitness app that tracks our steps or when we post photographs on a social media

platform like Instagram). On its own, the information we share with an app like Fitbit or a photograph we share on Instagram isn't valuable at all. But when a company has access to millions of users' daily step counts or millions of photographs, it has something that is highly valuable. This investment knowledge (what most people would now simply call data) can be used to optimize other projects. To illustrate, consider what happens when you're asked to upload an image of yourself to a digital platform. On its own, your photograph isn't valuable. If a platform has millions of tagged photographs just like yours, however, the photographs can be mined and, in turn, used to drive research and development. (As an example, Facebook used its trove of tagged user photographs to drive research and development on facial recognition technologies.)

Finally, despite being preoccupied with how the emerging era of the informational commodity would impact nation-states, Lyotard also recognized that in the future, nation-states might yield considerably less power than multinational technology companies. Early in his report on knowledge, he speculates:

> Already in the last few decades, economic powers have reached the point of imperiling the stability of the State through new forms of the circulation of capital that go by the generic name of *multi-national*

> *corporations*. These new forms of circulation imply that investment decisions have, at least in part, passed beyond the control of the nation-states. The question threatens to become even more thorny with the development of computer technology and telematics. Suppose, for example, that a firm such as IBM is authorized to occupy a belt in the earth's orbital field and launch communications satellites or satellites housing data banks. Who will have access to them? Who will determine which channels or data are forbidden? The State? Or will the State simply be one user among others? New legal issues will be raised, and with them the question: "who will know?"[9]

Four decades later, one conclusion seems to be that in many respects, states have become one user among others. What Lyotard could not have fully predicted in the late 1970s was that by the 2000s, IBM would be just one of the many multinationals yielding revenues in excess of most nation-states' GNPs.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Lyotard's ideas gained currency, especially his premise that knowledge itself would increasingly circulate as an "informational commodity" divorced from its use value. By the end of the twentieth century, critical theorists and economists alike recognized that this was happening and would have

widespread consequences. Not until the mid-aughts did the emerging use of the term *content* start to receive critical attention.

One of the earliest indications that we might want to approach the new use of the term *content* with a dose of skepticism appeared in cultural critic McKenzie Wark's 2006 book *A Hacker Manifesto*. As Wark wrote at the time, "Privatizing information and knowledge as commodified 'content' distorts and deforms its free development, and prevents the very concept of its freedom from its own free development." Wark further observed, "Workers and hackers have in common an interest in resisting educational 'content' that merely trains slaves for commodity production, but also in resisting the inroads the vectoralist class wishes to make into education as an industry."[10] The decision to at least periodically place *content* in scare quotes throughout *A Hacker Manifesto* was most likely not a coincidence. It suggests, at the very least, a wariness about the term's emerging currency in the capitalist economy under critique in the book.

In many respects, though, Wark's apprehension about uncritically adopting the term *content* has remained an exception to the rule. As the term grew more ubiquitous in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, critical dialogues about content—what it means in a digital era and its adoption and circulation across industries and

disciplines—have remained surprisingly rare. This brings me back to the central question of this book: What is content?

To begin, content isn't necessarily data, even if the two terms are frequently used interchangeably. Some argue that this is because content is contextualized information and data is not. Others argue that while content conveys a message (in words or images or sound), data does not. But as suggested earlier in this chapter, some content—for example, the Instagram egg—seems to exist simply for the sake of circulation alone and not to convey a message. Given such vexing problems, attempts to define content seem to lead to only the most imperfect operational definitions—for example, "all the stuff that circulates online"—but this too isn't quite right. Does a classic film streamed online rather than projected in a movie theater become content simply because of the context? It seems that content isn't just context specific but also subject to the eye of the beholder. I would never refer to French New Wave filmmaker Agnès Varda's vast trove of films as content, but I suspect many executives at Netflix and Amazon Prime would. In terms of classification, this makes defining content challenging. While a lot of content is produced simply to circulate as content (e.g., a blog post produced to promote a service or product), the content industry is also adept at appropriating an entire range

of existing texts, images, and recordings as content. And this raises one additional question: What is the content industry?

Just as content appears to point to many different things, the content industry seems to stretch across multiple industries that may or may not hold much in common. For this reason, the content industry may be best understood as an industry that exists only in parasitical relationship to other industries, from marketing and publishing to education and entertainment.

Types of Content

To help further define content and the content industry, it is useful to consider just a few different types of content and to further consider what this classification of content fails to do.

Content Marketing

Typically, content marketing is defined as the activity of creating and sharing valuable and relevant content (or at least content that appears to be valuable and relevant). While content marketing may directly pitch a product or service, it generally aims to build an audience. For example, a life coach may start a blog to share free advice. The advice shared on the blog remains free over time, but the

blog is ultimately a way for the coach to build a potential client list. At the center of content marketing is the concept of *organic growth*—a marketing strategy that compels customers to seek out businesses rather than the other way around.

Under the broader category of content marketing, several subfields exist, including branded content. Again, branded content doesn't take the form of a traditional advertisement; instead, it strives to offer information, usually in the form of a short article or video, that at least appears to be valuable and relevant. In addition, some forms of branded content seek to build brand loyalty by attaching a brand to a broader campaign. The Dove Self-Esteem Project is one example. In this case, the Dove brand created a series of advertisements and related educational resources targeting tween and teen girls that aim to send the message that girls should feel good about their bodies, whatever their size or appearance. The campaign wasn't directly selling Dove products but rather was actively working to create brand loyalty, especially among girls and their mothers, by associating Dove with a body-positive message.

Publishing Content

Although the content industry and publishing industry were once two different entities, the line between them continues to blur. While some publishers still focus on

the publication of books, many—especially educational publishers—now focus on the production of content. Among other critics, Michael Bhaskar, author of *The Content Machine: Towards a Theory of Publishing from the Printing Press to the Internet* (2013), has argued that one can't separate publishing from content. As Bhaskar observes, "Wherever you find publishing, you find content."[11] While some people in the publishing industry contend that all publishing output is content, some publishers (e.g., niche literary presses) continue to talk exclusively or primarily about producing books. For the many publishers who have already embraced the idea of content, though, books are certainly no longer their exclusive focus. In the publishing industry, *content* can refer to printed books or ebooks but also to other products, such as curricular modules, online archives, and even videos. Moreover, this non-book content is not always produced to augment existing books in a publisher's catalog. As a result, the publishing industry has arguably already drifted from being an industry focused exclusively on books to one that produces other types of content, including content traditionally associated with the television and film industry.

Educational Content

Another growing and highly valuable branch of the content industry is educational content. Some educational

content overlaps with publishing content (e.g., digital content based on existing printed books). Online courses and personalized learning apps also feature educational content of varying quality. However, educational content is by no means restricted to content targeting the K–12 and higher education markets. As companies seek to streamline their training to keep existing employees up to date on new technologies and platforms, the training industry has also expanded, creating new demands for educational content targeting adult learners across sectors and over the course of the career cycle. In the twenty-first century, many private companies are educating not only their employees but also their customers and clients. For example, as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and blockchain technologies transform everything from home appliances to banking, consumers increasingly face a market dominated by products they don't yet fully understand. To help promote the sale of new and emerging products and services, private companies are increasingly also investing in the production of educational content for consumers and clients.

Entertainment Content

The most ubiquitous part of the content industry is arguably entertainment content. Entertainment content can take the form of a television series, film, video game, or

audio recording, among other forms. Most of the world's largest technology companies, from Amazon to Apple, are already engaged in the production of entertainment content. Of course, like marketing content, entertainment content often serves multiple purposes. A high percentage of the entertainment content that one encounters on platforms such as Amazon or Netflix, for example, was created first and foremost to secure subscribers. Netflix's first original production, *House of Cards*, stands as a case in point. Before *House of Cards*, Netflix was in the business of streaming productions by other studios. Beyond serving as entertainment content, *House of Cards* helped Netflix attract millions of subscribers and, in turn, fund its transformation from a streaming platform to a production studio.

In the case of entertainment content, the discussion of content gets especially confusing. From the standpoint of a large content provider such as Netflix, everything on the site may very well be categorized as content. However, some of the films available on the site were not produced as content. On sites such as Netflix, much of the "content" predates the rise of the content industry and was in circulation long before anyone was talking about content or the content industry. In this case, existing categories of film and television are, in a sense, subsumed by the broader category of content, which brings us to a final and important consideration.

The aforementioned categories certainly help to classify different types of content—for example, by distinguishing educational content from entertainment content. But what is most striking about these categories is what they fail to do: These emerging classifications don't tell us anything about genre (e.g., poetry versus fiction or sitcom versus drama), medium (e.g., print versus film), or format (e.g., 16 mm film versus video or vinyl record versus MP3). In the world of content, genre, medium, and format are secondary concerns and, in some instances, they seem to disappear entirely. We're left with a series of classifications that emphasize where or how content circulates in different sectors and markets. One might conclude that with the rise of the content industry, we have already seen a shift away from understanding cultural production in relation to aesthetic and material categories and toward understanding cultural production solely through a market-focused lens. If this is the case, the message is clear: Cultural production matters, but only to the extent that it helps drive profits in a specific market sector. What is being said, how it is being said, and via what medium are secondary to the market itself. The rise of the content industry is the ultimate expression of neoliberalism. Under the logic of neoliberalism, everything—politics, desire, sociality, art, culture, and so on—is reduced to mere nodes in the market economy. Reducing all forms of cultural production to content not only conveniently

erases the specificity of different types of cultural production but also effectively ensures that all types of cultural production can be easily substituted for each other and exchanged. After all, all content is part of a single and indistinguishable flow.

In the chapters that follow, this book delves deeper into the content industry. Subsequent chapters explore what differentiates user-generated content from content produced by compensated (albeit often grossly undercompensated) workers in content farms and how fields ranging from art and literature to journalism to politics have been affected by the rise of the content industry. Specific attention is paid to how the content industry continues to disrupt the field of cultural production, transforming it into a place where one's ability to engage in work as an artist or a writer is increasingly contingent on one's content capital; that is, on one's ability to produce content not about one's work but about one's status as an artist, writer, or performer. The book concludes by offering a preliminary look at the future of content and the content industry and the potential impact of automation, which threatens to turn content production into something increasingly divorced from human producers altogether.

NOTES

Preface

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