



THE HINDU HOME KITCHEN AND THE INTERNET OF LANDLORDS: Understanding the Creator Economy

SUCHARITA KANJILAL
Bard College

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9052-9802>

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Leela Ranjan lives so far outside of central Pune that autorickshaw drivers hesitate to take me there. Leela's palatial row house forms part of a wealthy, beautifully manicured gated community, Evergreen Valley, hidden among the undulating, industrial landscape of outer Pune, a mid-sized city in western India. The house features a capacious front yard with fountain and firepit, five bedrooms, and a cavernous, marble-floored kitchen run by two full-time domestic workers.

Leela was an early success story on the Indian food-blogging scene, starting out with a BlogSpot page in 2011, as a lonely wife on an H4 visa who had moved to Virginia, in the United States, for her husband's tech job.¹ That her neighborhood in Pune resembles a Virginia suburb is no coincidence. Evergreen Valley had modeled itself so uncannily around U.S. suburbia that it had felt irresistible to the couple when they had moved back to India. Leela's bungalow keeps going as you walk past the screen doors in the living room into the backyard. A vegetable garden and rolling hills mark its far end. In the foreground is a twelve-seater outdoor dining table, fed by a fully functioning, exquisitely outfitted studio kitchen—Leela's second kitchen. Leela shoots her recipe content here every

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afternoon, once her gardener, Ajay *kaka*, sets up the heavy lighting and camera equipment. Ten years and a transcontinental homecoming later, Leela's blog has become a popular recipe website, with accompanying YouTube and Instagram pages. With millions of followers, four cookbooks, and more in the works, Leela now calls herself a "creator," one of millions around the world trying to make a living in the global "creator economy."

Starting with a view from Leela's studio kitchen, this article analyzes the production relations of the creator economy, the global industry of monetized online content creation. Specifically, it follows Indian "home chefs"—those who make content about home-cooking for YouTube and Instagram, and run related offline enterprises such as catering and cloud kitchens.² Such an analysis is borne from long-term in-person and digital ethnography with home chefs in the cities of Mumbai, Pune, and Indore, among the Indian diaspora in Singapore, and myriad other locations accessed virtually.³

On a global scale, the creator economy is valued at anywhere between \$400 billion and \$2 trillion USD.⁴ It includes creators—some 200 million digital bloggers, photographers, videographers, and podcasters worldwide—who are trying to earn a living by monetizing media production on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (as well as Patreon, Substack, Twitch, etc.). It encompasses, in nebulous fashion, the many economic activities generated by the frenetic global churn of user-generated digital content. Paid creators, platforms, brands, advertisers, and unpaid users of digital media form its key constituents (Zuboff 2019; Jarrett 2016; Lukács 2020; Cunningham and Craig 2019, 2021). Beyond its material relations, the creator economy also champions a hegemonizing ethos, an ideological shift in how work is being re-imagined. In industry and journalistic accounts, the creator ethos popularizes the idea that everyday people everywhere now have the technological means to become flexible "micro-entrepreneurs" who can earn a living from their individuality and creativity (Tran 2022).

Content creation is a hugely popular emerging occupation in India. Executives from major platforms (including YouTube's Indian-American CEO Neal Mohan) frequently describe India as a major player in the global creator economy, and promise to train and "empower" millions of Indian creators (Dixit 2024) during well-funded press tours.⁵ This speculation is matched by the unmissable proliferation of Indian YouTubers and Instagrammers across urban, semi-urban, and rural geographies. Home-cooking has endured as a particularly well-trodden genre of content creation. A pioneering home chef, sixty-five-year-old Nisha Madhulika, is regularly dubbed "India's richest female YouTuber,"

having amassed a reported net worth of Rs 43 crore (\$5 million USD) since she began her channel in 2011. By some estimates, the Indian creator economy is worth between \$8 billion and \$39 billion USD, with tens of millions of Indians attempting this form of work (Pamnani 2022).⁶ On creators' own pages, in journalistic and industry narratives, and now in proposed state legislation seeking to regulate them, creators are typically described as entrepreneurs and "CEOs," independent media producers, or digital news broadcasters. This platform-based refashioning of media production emerges in a neoliberal conjuncture where entrepreneurship—in India, as elsewhere around the world—is championed by state and corporate elites as the key to nation-building (Irani 2019; Freeman 2015; García 2021; Gooptu 2013; Hall 2011).

Despite the narrative exuberance about the creator economy's entrepreneurial possibilities, however, some estimates suggest that fewer than 1 percent of Indian creators earn a full, liveable income from such work (Pamnani 2022). Some creators enter brief periods of viral fame before flaming out, many scarcely know if they are making money or not, and most must work ever longer days to keep up with the demands of content creation. The vast incongruity between valuations and earnings, possibilities and disappointments, spectacle and ubiquity begs the question: What kind of economic activity is this?

The hype cycle that accompanies so-called new economies often focuses on the novelty of the technologies involved, or intriguing new media figureheads such as celebrity "influencers" (Tran 2022). Some scholarly works have followed these headwinds into similar lines of inquiry (Cunningham and Craig 2019, 2021; Abidin 2018) and highlighted the discursive strategies of racial, gender, and religious identification used by popular creators (Pham 2015). The aestheticized marketing of individual "selves," and the hope of a viral rise to celebrity status, are indeed crucial aspects of creators' daily work. However, "influencers" with viral content form only a minute fraction of creators—though they become overrepresented in scholarly and popular accounts because of a methodological orientation toward consumption-side content analyses and/or a focus on the stated motivations of individual creators.⁷

In this article, I confront such works ethnographically by closely observing content creation's production processes instead. From this perspective, the analytical unit that emerges as indispensable to platform-based media work is the household. Households, defined here as resource-sharing units that organize the means and relations of reproduction, subsidize and stabilize the capricious work of content creation and platform-based production more generally.⁸ Content

creation, I contend, must therefore be understood not as an unprecedented or novel form of work, but as part of the historical endurance and ongoing global expansion of household industries—a labor arrangement also variously called home-based piecework, homework, or the putting-out system. In the current conjuncture of global capitalism,⁹ this centuries-old labor form, once defined by its precarity, is spreading across a wider workforce and given new ideological gloss as what I call the *household start-up*. Situating content creation within this longer history of household industries, I suggest, better clarifies the political stakes of platform labor, technological change, and the so-called future of work. Such a reframing of the relationships between production and reproduction, domestic life and capitalist relations builds on perspectives from feminist economic anthropology (Bear et al. 2015; Appel 2019; Tsing 2009; Yanagisako 2002; Ho 2009), internationalist Marxisms and anthropological political economy (Mies 1982; Naidu 2023; Hall 2019; Trouillot 2025), and critical platform studies (Sadowski 2020; Dubal 2020, 2023).

The article's ethnographic analysis unfolds in three parts. First, I etch out the production relations of content creation, following home chefs in the mid-sized Indian city of Indore. In part 2, I unravel the paradoxical entry of the Hindu home kitchen, once a guarded space of heterosexual caste-making, into the global market. Part 3 details the resignification of the household into the household start-up, showing how household infrastructures are repurposed for content production, while digital technology is, conversely, transformed into a household infrastructure. In the conclusion, I broaden the analysis beyond Indian home chefs, who, while richly illustrative of this industry's key contradictions, are not exceptional in their relation to platforms. I conclude by outlining the theoretical implications of the household start-up for understanding platform work and contemporary capitalist labor relations.

PRAGYA AND THE INTERNET OF LANDLORDS

January 2021, Pragya's home in Indore

Rumor has it that Pragya now makes Rs 10,000 (\$120 USD) for a single product placed in an Instagram post—but no one knows for sure. Born to a wealthy family of Brahmins (the group atop the Hindu caste order), Pragya was twenty years old when she was married off during the final year of her bachelor's degree. She parachuted into her marital home, with no mother-in-law to help, and a husband and father-in-law insisting on three home-cooked meals a day. Pragya is the self-styled "co-founder" of a group I call the Recipe Association, a

collective of stay-at-home moms, and one dad, in Indore, all looking to monetize their home-cooking expertise.

Pragya laughs as she recounts her “creator journey,” which started in 2011. “I knew nothing about cooking. Zero, not even *chai*.” Anxious to manage her household responsibilities, Pragya started asking her grandmother and sister-in-law for cooking tips, and consulting her two maids, who now do all of the off-screen work for her posts. By 2013, she had gained a reputation among friends for writing precise, delicious, and vegetarian recipes, so someone suggested starting a page on the Blogger platform. Her lawyer husband, who would often bustle past as we prepped food in Pragya’s kitchen, was impressed by her growing enterprise that nevertheless allowed her to stay home and cook. So, he started photographing recipes for her until she had completed a three-month photography course herself. A Hindi speaker, Pragya “polished” her blog for a global audience by signing up for private English tutoring from her friend Devika. Devika was a neighborhood language teacher who trained students for entrance exams to Indian business and management schools. (Devika would later join the Recipe Association to promote Go with the Dough, the bakery she opened in the front room of her home, following COVID-related crises in her own family business.)

Two years in, as Pragya’s following grew, a cousin working a tech job in San Francisco migrated her blog from Blogger to a more professional-looking WordPress website. On it, Pragya started a revenue stream by hosting pay-per-click display ads via Google AdSense and some affiliate marketing, linking readers to ingredients sold by specific vendors, such as the local baking supplies store Hema’s Delights. Hema’s Delights (itself named after an enterprising housewife) had grown its business over the past decade by stocking products and equipment in step with the latest social media food trends. In 2016, Pragya moved to Instagram as her primary platform, where her content is now more consistently monetized through collaborations with brands selling home-cooking and children’s consumer goods. Whether it’s instant noodles, blenders, or teen clothing, these brands pay Pragya variable sums, per post, to “boost” their products. Where Pragya took the Instagram route, other early Indian food bloggers ventured into YouTube, earning incremental dollar amounts based on an algorithmic determination of engagement metrics for their home-cooking videos.

A veteran creator in Indore, Pragya has lately branched out into sponsored restaurant reviews, paid “red carpet” appearances at upscale hospitality industry events, and gracing product launches for food, drinks, and mother-and-child consumer goods. Her page often features her daughters as child models. At the

Recipe Association, Pragma describes herself as “co-founder,” “CEO,” and “treasurer.” She acts as the association’s marketing liaison, working with the restaurants and five-star hotels that host its monthly meetings and workshops—for the price of a lifestyle feature in the city’s Hindi press, with which Pragma has extensive contacts. Much as on Leela’s website, the language of start-ups peppers Pragma’s creator enterprise: “Founder and CEO,” “hustle and grind,” “trends,” and “innovation.”

Through Pragma’s fourteen-year-long creator journey, we see content creation crystallizing into a production relationship between her household—her family, maids, the house itself—and the digital platforms through which she finds audiences, as well as the network of food, beverage, lifestyle, and media firms with which she liaises. Within this circuit of platform-mediated accumulation, Pragma has an essential economic role.

Jathan Sadowski (2020) argues that platforms act as rentiers in this conjuncture of digital capitalism, creating what he calls the “Internet of Landlords.” Platforms, he writes, devise new ways to capture value without themselves creating value through production, by inserting themselves as indispensable intermediaries in processes of production, circulation, and consumption. The main strategy “is to turn social interactions and economic transactions into ‘services’ that take place on the platform” (Sadowski 2020, 567). Rather than producing a commodity themselves, platforms instead position themselves as intermediary providers of “X-as-a service,” while monopolizing the means of distribution. Hence, Uber becomes an intermediary between drivers and customers offering “taxi-as-a-service,” or Zomato and DoorDash intercede restaurants and patrons through “delivery-as-a-service.” Essential to the landlord relation, Sadowski (2020) shows, is the process through which platformization turns socioeconomic transactions not into a finite exchange of goods and services, but into an open-ended series of “tributes” that users pay to use such a service.

In such a system, platformization turns the exchange process into a series of infinitely expanding and differentiated micro-transactions, characterized by unceasing circulation, rather than fixed labor or eventual ownership of the services exchanged. Here, the platform, as landlord-intermediary, monopolizes the means of circulation and thus retains primary control of the exchange process, what Sadowski (2020) describes as a condition of “micro-enclosure.” One example of this mechanism is the platformization of a software such as Adobe Acrobat, or a “smart” HP printer, which a user could once own by paying a one-time fee. Now, users must choose from differently priced monthly subscription plans

to gain access to all aspects of the software and/or smart device, enabling extraction-as-a-service to continue indefinitely. In the world of digital content, the infinite scroll indexes a similar relation. Where Sadowski more often focuses on the consumer end of this process, on the production side, workers that provide platformized services are also locked into relations of ever expanding, infinite micro-transactions. Platform-based service workers are not business owners, nor are they classed as employees with fixed working days and duties. Instead, they work for the platforms as independent subcontractors or gig workers who must attempt to enact as many transactions as possible. Such an arrangement is concretized in the form of piece wages for discrete amounts of digital labor, rather than a full and free wage based on fixed labor time. [Veena Dubal \(2020, 2023\)](#) terms this arrangement “digital piecework” and argues that it is rife with “algorithmic wage discrimination,” characterized by unpredictable, variable, and personalized pay.

Within the Internet of Landlords, platforms that form the creator economy offer *advertising-as-a-service*. Here, Pragya is a media worker analogous to the Uber driver or DoorDasher. Instagram (owned by Meta) and YouTube (owned by Google) act as monopolistic intermediaries in between producers and consumers of media as well as the firms that sell the myriad goods and services advertised through such media. But Pragya’s content is not the only commodity in this circuit; it is also her content’s by-product—audience/user engagement and the data generated from content’s circulation—that is either fetishized as valuable in itself ([Sadowski 2020](#), 567) or captured and sold by platforms to advertisers, brands, data brokers, and data-hungry speculative projects such as large language models (LLMs). Within such a system, Pragya earns uneven, inscrutable sums per product placed or link posted to her Instagram page and website, based on ever-changing, algorithmically mediated engagement metrics. [Dubal \(2020, 37; emphasis added\)](#) describes digital piecework as a return to the arrangements of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century piecework industries, which exploited working-class women by “*developing and extending ‘homework.’*” This is where the household industry form comes into sharper focus.

The critical literature on platforms examines the accumulation processes from the purview of firms, technologies, and gig workers. But the existence and meanings of a gig worker’s personal assets, social relations, non-digital infrastructures, and worksites—all instrumental to “homework”—remain undifferentiated background arrangements.¹⁰ Shifting the vantage ethnographically disambiguates this second aspect of the platforms’ extractive apparatus—a move Dubal gestures

at above, but does not fully realize—the material role of households. Moreover, when placed in a global perspective, digital piecework appears not as the *return* to some obsolete labor form, but as evidence for the *expansion* of a centuries-old labor form that has always been an integral part of the capitalist world market.

Households, which I have previously defined as resource-sharing units through which the means and relations of reproduction are organized,¹¹ are crucial to capital accumulation, as anthropologists and other feminist scholars have demonstrated (Yanagisako 2002; Appel 2019; Bear et al. 2015; Dalla Costa 2019; Federici 2012; Bhattacharya 2017; Davis 1981; Trouillot 2025). Not only do households reproduce labor power but, as Marxist feminists in the Global South have shown, they frequently also serve as sites of commodity production through household industries and smallholder/peasant production. Household industry is cheaper and more extractive than salaried, work-place based wage labor partly because it is remunerated, as Dubal describes, in piece wages, that is, in recurring micro-transactions. When compared with time-remunerated wage labor, piecework diminishes labor power by lengthening the workday indefinitely and increasing competition between workers. But *home*-based piecework, additionally atomizes and depoliticizes workers by sequestering them to their home base.¹² Moreover, households' pooled resources step in to subsidize piecework's de-commodification of labor (see La Berge 2018).¹³ In this sense, household industries offer capital a particular kind of spatial fix (Harvey 2001). Households' durable infrastructures double up as worksites and production tools, enabling a further “shifting of costs by capital” onto the relations of reproduction, which become unified with the relations of production (Naidu 2023, 2). Middlemen and rentiers become the biggest beneficiaries of such a system, capturing most of the surplus value produced via subcontracted household industry.

It is these relationships that Maria Mies (1982), working with Indian lace-makers in the 1970s, described as “housewifization,” where precarious home-based production was mystified by development agencies as part-time piecework for so-termed housewives. This widely practiced global labor form, which for centuries dominated especially Indian production systems, is sometimes incorrectly characterized as a transient or obsolete phase of industrial capitalism, limited to poor, non-Western, feminized, and feudal contexts of production (Mies 1982; Naidu 2023; Prügl 1999; Boris and Daniels 1989; Phillips 2013). While workplace-based wage labor is often taken as the normative labor form of contemporary capitalism, scholars have shown how home-based production, like peasant production, has proved integral to the circulation of a vast number of

commodities in a capitalist world market. Moreover, in the early years of the neoliberal conjuncture, Mies and her colleagues such as [Claudia von Werlhof \(1988\)](#) predicted that, far from being limited to more marginalized workers in the Global South,¹⁴ these precarious labor arrangements were now spreading in a different direction—to wealthier workers in advanced capitalist scenarios around the world. Pragma, a prototypical worker for a global platform-based industry, demonstrates the prescience of this forty-year-old analysis.

Pragma's creator journey exemplifies how platform labor is predicated on the very inextricability of the means and relations of production from the means and relations of reproduction. Some feminist scholars have used unpaid domestic labor, so-called women's work, gendered labor, and the "social factory" as theoretical analogies for the unwaged aspects of digital labor ([Jarrett 2016](#); [Lukács 2020](#)). But creators' platform-based work is not related to domesticity by mere likeness, nor is it adequately explained by the transhistorical reification of "women's work" into a singular, self-evident labor form.¹⁵ Rather, content creation's model of surplus extraction is made possible through the integration of creators' complex and conjunctural domestic relations, not analogically but *concretely and infrastructurally*, into circuits of digitized global production. Platform labor is not "like" domestic labor; it is labor, quite literally, domesticated—via particular, ongoing technological and ideological rearrangements. Platforms such as Blogger, WordPress, Instagram, and YouTube, as monopolistic intermediaries, profit from advertising-as-a-service through the integration of the households of its workers into the production process. These households both subsidize the shortfalls of fragmented payments and bear part of the fixed capital and infrastructural costs of commodity production. The consequence is that not just women, but creators across class, race, gender, age, and other forms of difference now carry out home-based media work for algorithmically discriminatory digital piece wages, with a series of middlemen capturing the value generated through content's global circulation.

These production arrangements have the effect of cheapening the cost of advertising, journalistic, and other skilled media labor more broadly. In Pragma's case, tertiary businesses such as hotels, restaurants, local food-supply stores like Hema's Delights, and marketing and media companies insert themselves parasitically into these circuits. These firms pay flexible sums to creators like Pragma to produce self-funded media at home via platforms, rather than the firms paying for full-time advertising workers, photographers, writers, stylists, or studio space themselves. For news media, like the Hindi press with which Pragma is

closely associated, creators offer journalistic work by the article or blurb—for less than the cost of hiring lifestyle reporters with full wages, benefits, and labor protections. On the flip side, creators rarely earn a liveable income from content creation. They draw on existing household resources, hold separate jobs, or launch other small-scale and offline freelancing arrangements such as merchandising, speaking engagements, and workshops to cover their costs of reproduction. In all of these ways, Pragma's creator enterprise exemplifies the socioeconomic and spatial arrangements of household industry.

Nevertheless, the technological aspects of platformization alone do not fully explain this ongoing global expansion of the household industry form, especially in the case of more powerful class, gender, race, and caste groups. While gig work in other platform industries is often performed by fungible workers from marginalized social locations, content creation is fairly unusual in this regard. Though content creators exist across social classes, this kind of platformized work uniquely attracts also those from wealthier or more powerful communities. In India, on-screen content work is often hostile to creators from marginalized caste, class, and religious backgrounds; they face abusive comments and algorithmic de-amplification, alongside other infrastructural entry barriers, as I will detail later (Kanjilal 2024; Chandran 2022). A vast number of home chefs are specifically dominant-caste, middle- or upper-class Hindu women. But why would ostensibly wealthy Indians want to feed the content factory for digital piece wages? The next section places home chefs like Pragma in their sociopolitical conjuncture to examine how elite new workers are enlisted into this extractive old labor form via the *household start-up*.

WELCOME TO PRACHI'S KITCHEN

January 2022, Indore

Prachi is an unusual member of the Recipe Association. Several of her colleagues, like Pragma, are now creators with sizeable followings and a range of offline home-cooking ventures such as Go with the Dough. Prachi is an outlier. Though an enthusiastic member of the group, Prachi's father-in-law and husband have disallowed her from having a social media account and are wary of her interactions with strangers. It is therefore to my immense surprise that Prachi has invited me home to dinner at her father-in-law's explicit request. It appears that Mr. Khandelwal, a businessman from the Baniya community,¹⁶ heard of my research from Prachi, and requested that he, too, get a chance to contribute his insights to what he has decided is my "book on the history of Indian food."

The Khandelwal estate houses the family bungalow, a large standalone home office, and several *godowns* (an emic term for warehouses). To begin my visit, a stately Mr. Khandelwal guides me around these warehouses, which store processed foods for the multinational consumer goods company which has employed him for decades, since he started as a door-to-door salesman. At the bungalow's threshold, we take our shoes off and bow to a Ganesh idol by the entrance. On the family mantelpiece sits a faded photograph of Mr. Khandelwal, surrounded by staff, inaugurating one of these warehouses. Another picture has Prachi in a silk saree, beaming next to Pankaj Bhadouria, winner of the TV show *MasterChef India*—a former housewife-turned-celebrity chef and content creator. As Prachi retreats to a corner, I listen studiously as the patriotic Mr. Khandelwal tells me what my research should be about. He approves of my choice to visit Indore, “India’s most foodie city.” Prachi, too, he says, is an excellent cook.

In fact, I am trying to get her to start something with her cooking, from here itself. But she keeps trying to work outside. She could start a catering or pickles or snacks business instead. We have so much space, our offices, three cars, four maids, gardeners, and drivers. My son and I are both MBAs, we can also help. Why go out when everything is right here? We have everything we need to launch Prachi’s Kitchen.

He looks over warmly at Prachi. *Hai na beta?* “Isn’t that right, my child?”

Mr. Khandelwal’s trajectory through a sales career in the 1990s into the 2000s follows a pattern common to many middle-class Indian families after the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s. For some class and caste groups, this was a period of upward mobility amid the expansion of new multinational businesses selling consumer goods, like those in the Khandelwal *godowns*. Purnima Mankekar (1999, 48) argues that as this period “opened the door wider to transnational flows of capital, information and desire, postcolonial modernity became increasingly articulated in terms of consumerism.” By the late 2000s, as families like the Khandelwals amassed considerable savings, the regime of transnational consumption would be matched with the pursuit of further mobility in global markets, but now through production, or more specifically, the aspiration to business ownership. Lilly Irani (2019, 2) has described this as the regime of “entrepreneurial citizenship”—the common sense “that [middle-class] citizens can construct markets, produce value and do nation-building all at the same time.”

It is this spirit of entrepreneurial citizenship that the Indian prime minister Narendra Modi would champion in Indore in January 2023. Arriving in the city for Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Overseas Indians Day), a business convention courting the global Indian diaspora, Modi praised Indore's teeming food culture, declaring it India's *Swaad Ki Rajdhani* (Taste Capital).¹⁷ Modi would then take the visiting group of diasporic Indian business leaders to an Indori *namkeen* (snacks) factory run by a successful family firm. A demonstration of the Modi government's nationalistic business mantra "Make in India," the visit showcased the apparently underutilized skills and potential inherent in Indian artisan, craft, family, and cottage industries that could be tapped by global markets to make "Smart Cities" like Indore an "engine of development in the world."¹⁸

Prachi and her father-in-law, like Pragya and others in the Recipe Association, can be better understood when located within these historical and ideological currents. In more private conversations in the confines of her prized kitchen garden, Prachi would tell me she was trained as a doctor, but had become a "simple housewife" when she married into the Khandelwal family. Now Prachi longed to make something more of her cooking skills. She had won dozens of local cooking contests for Indori housewives, regularly sent recipes to regional newspapers, and dreamed of one day appearing on *MasterChef India*, just like her idol Pankaj Bhadouria. She had worked briefly as a "guest home chef" at a local five-star hotel. But her family was never pleased about her working—and especially cooking—away from home; the hotel stint had been reluctantly granted and quickly rescinded.

Prachi is not a content creator, unlike her friends in the association who are all aspiring, if not successful, creators with screen names much like Prachi's Kitchen. Her father-in-law and husband are suspicious of what Prachi might encounter amid the internet's publics, just as they are leery of her attempts to work outside the house. I draw attention to her story, however, to highlight how she and Mr. Khandelwal, and other Indians of their social position, were wrestling with a new contradiction amidst this regime of entrepreneurial citizenship: the struggle over the meaning of kitchens within the Hindu home.

How the Hindu Home Kitchen Opened for Business

Domestic kitchens are complex infrastructural sites with contingent material and ideological significance (Federici 2012; Appadurai 1981; Sutton 2014). In South Asia, kitchens have been crucial to maintaining and mediating the inside-outside oppositions between the home and the world (Chatterjee 1993; Ray

2015; Daniel 1984; Masselos 2007; Appadurai 1981; Solomon 2016). Many of these oppositional norms are rooted in Hindu caste rules around commensality and inter-dining, which, while most strictly adhered to by Brahmins, flow hegemonically, if flexibly, through the wider social structure.¹⁹ Ravindra S. Khare (1976) argues that the primary distinction in Hindu cosmological understandings of food has been between foods cooked at home in opposition to foods cooked in public, a distinction that further mediates the politics of intra-caste and inter-caste dining. Within this moral regime, the domestic hearth has served as the “integral, indispensable part of the Hindu home” (Khare 1976, 11). The morality of the household and domestic hearth is completed, above all, by heterosexual marriage. As a result, Khare argues, the conjugal domestic kitchen is the last bastion that Hindu families seek to protect from changing social, political, and economic circumstances. Thus, the Hindu home kitchen remains an enduring space of heterosexual caste reproduction, and food cooked through its infrastructures (especially when vegetarian) is afforded the highest level of ritual purity (Kanjilal 2024). This distinct quality of home cooking is evident in the stories of creators like Prachi and Pragya, whose families insist so forcefully on home-cooked meals. Crucially, as Khare illustrates, the value of home-cooked food is determined by how the home kitchen is exceptional as a site and infrastructure of food preparation. Here, the moral and ideological values afforded to the cooking space, its cooks, and its infrastructures are together imbued into the foods processed therein.

These politics of processing (Solomon 2016) further demonstrate that the Hindu home kitchen has historically been locked in a tense antinomy with its subordinate other—public dining (Ray 2015). Barring exceptions like temple foods prepared by Brahmins, food cooked outside the home, especially commercially—by hawkers, street vendors, workers in sweetshops, cafeterias, and restaurants—is cast as a ritually poorer (if also more libidinal, masculinist, erotic, tastier) alternative to home-cooked food prepared by wives, mothers, and grandmothers. As a result, Indian cultures of public dining developed uneasily and unevenly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and were notably absent before this period (Conlon 1995). Restaurants, eateries, and street vendors have at once enabled cosmopolitan experimentation and, sometimes, the dissolution of caste rules of commensality (Staples 2020), but they continue to produce anxieties around access to urban space, hygiene, and caste and class contamination (Anjaria 2016; Solomon 2016). While small-scale public eateries are frequented

by the working poor for daily meals, workers of higher caste groups rely on elaborate systems of packed homemade lunches for daily workplace meals.

Moreover, feeding professions outside the home are the domain of non-Brahmin caste groups, Muslims, and men. This caste-based labor stratification within Indian food-production systems is not an epiphenomenon, but a key feature of racial and postcolonial capitalism—where “access to specific occupations and the decision to work are subject to historical and cultural constraints” (Naidu 2023, 6). To offer only a few examples: The groups legally characterized as Other Backward Communities (OBCs) form the largest caste category among street vendors and sweet makers in India, and more than 70 percent of Mumbai’s restaurants are run by the Bunts, a meat-eating Kshatriya community (Iverson and Raghavendra 2006). The other popular style of “Indian” restaurant is Mughlai, staffed by Muslim cooks. Consequently, Indian restaurants abroad have also mainly been run by non-Brahmin Indian male migrants, or Bangladeshi and Pakistani restaurateurs (Ray 2016). Wealthy dominant-caste Hindus, and especially its married women, have rarely worked as chefs, cooks, or street vendors. It is for this reason that Prachi’s family was loathe to let her cook in a local hotel. Taken together, these historical-political developments have meant that in India and its diasporas, feminized home-cooking, *ghar ka khaana*, has maintained a stubborn separateness from the outside foods of the restaurant and street. The domestic kitchen, by these logics, constitutes not an empty background space, but a collection of reproductive infrastructures loaded with caste and conjugal meanings.

At the same time, these tensions between home cooking and public dining do not remain unchanging, but are often imaginatively navigated amid new historical and material relations. By 2019, when I began this fieldwork, the Hindu home kitchen had become increasingly viewed by dominant-caste Indians—like Pragya, Prachi and the Khandelwals—as also the potential site and substance for entrepreneurship.²⁰ This major ideological shift was being noted extensively in a series of pan-India food and beverage industry reports.²¹ Predicting that in the coming years, the “*ghar ki rasoi* [home kitchen] would take centre stage” in Indian culinary markets, these reports were co-authored by some popular “home chefs” themselves, who by then had been deemed industry experts.

By returning to Prachi’s household, we can see how this inside/outside contradiction around feeding professions was starting to find a new resolution. The distinctions between household and workplace were already nebulous in the spatial and functional organization of the Khandelwal estate and family *godowns*.

The other infrastructures of their household were, similarly, being reimagined by the enterprising Mr. Khandelwal as holding potential for a new, home-based business through which they might monetize Prachi's culinary expertise without her having to a work outside. "Why go out," he had said, "when everything is right *here*?"

Mr. Khandelwal's rationale helps explain how older, socially stratified labor arrangements are creatively incorporated into emergent ideological and technological conjunctures. As entrepreneurship became the hegemonic frame through which the value of home-cooking had to be reimagined, the antagonisms between home cooking and public dining could best be resolved by reimagining the household as a start-up. In re-invigorating home-based piecework with the affective promise of start-ups, the normative stipulations of Hindu social reproduction could remain in place even as the kitchen was transformed into a productive infrastructure. Creators and their families were proud of their domestic abilities, and a home business was a way for these women to participate in the spirit of entrepreneurial citizenship without having to radically upend the political and ritual constitution of their households.²² Though Prachi made for an extreme case in not being allowed a social media page at all, for others in the Recipe Association, content creation presented a similar opportunity to turn their kitchens into a start-up infrastructure without fundamentally challenging its moral imperatives. Where wage labor as a restaurant chef would not do, digital piecework as a home chef offered a reasonable resolution.

Furthermore, on the consumer end of content creation, creators gain followers by edifying performances of social difference (race, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, sexuality, citizenship), such that difference itself constitutes the primary strategy of online engagement (Kanjilal 2024; Pham 2015). On YouTube and Instagram, the highly regulated performances of caste, gender, and race that structure the Hindu home could be monetized discursively—through content about "authentic home-cooking" recipes—without being unsettled materially. Why go out, when everything is *right* here.

What changed, then, was that a wider range of meanings was now being afforded to the domestic kitchen—a means through which market-based production could be carried out by sedimenting and reifying, rather than troubling, one's social location. Leela, a diasporic wife in the United States, turned to blogging to adhere to a prevailing immigration regime. Prachi's father emphasized the respectability of entrepreneurialism undertaken within the ambit of one's place within the household. Pragya tended to her family responsibilities while

also bringing them creatively into her new creator career. The gendered, racialized, and caste-stratified domestic relationships and infrastructures that organized social reproduction simultaneously made materially possible and rendered ideologically legitimate home-based piecework's transformation into the household start-up.

Rather than showing that platform technologies simply reproduce gender, race, or caste-based inequalities, then, this resignification of the Hindu home kitchen into the household start-up demonstrates a much more complex articulation between social difference, platform economies, and the current ideological conjuncture. A historical moment in which social identification is the new entrepreneurial frontier meets the material arrangements of platformization, and together they make the possibility of a home business feel available to most anyone. In the process, the affective lure of the household start-up mystifies and secures consent for platforms' extractive labor arrangements among an expanding pool of workers. Content creation not only attracts already precarious social groups into the gig economy but it also draws wealthier and more financially stable workers—including home cooks who may not need to work at all—into the unstable labor form of home-based piecework. And though, like other gig workers, creators do not control or own much within the global supply chains of platform economies (Tsing 2009), their labors are recast in the upwardly mobile language of representation, entrepreneurship, and business ownership—as Indian/Hindu/women CEOs, co-founders, and influencers, rather than gig-based media workers. And in this way, consent for old and extractive home-based piecework is secured, in experience and narrative, as the enterprising future of work.

REGULAR, EVERYDAY SMARTPHONES

July 2021, Mumbai/Zoom

This afternoon, I had joined twelve women for a food photography workshop run over Zoom by Hemangi, a Bangalore-based creator. The spots for the two-day, \$40 session had filled up within minutes of Hemangi's Instagram announcement. With 25,000 followers, Hemangi runs workshops for aspiring "small business owners, bakers, home chefs and content creators." She would teach us how to photograph home-cooked food, coach us on building a social media presence, using Instagram analytics, and incorporating product placements. The participants included some retirees, other self-styled housewives, and some software professionals, each hoping to explore an alternate and more fulfilling career.

“Plates!” Hemangi began.

The most important thing on Instagram, Hemangi said, was for photographers to establish a unique style, by creatively juxtaposing cuisine-appropriate plates and dishes with subtle social cues in the same frame: “If it’s home food, it should look like it.” Hemangi thus outlined her rules. “Western” food should go with lighter, ceramic plates. But Indian food was best served on plates from one’s family kitchen, ideally stainless steel, copper, or brass, to highlight its turmeric hues. Old, family “heirloom” utensils make dishes look more personal, she added. We moved onto “framing,” discussing the camera angles suited to specific food shapes, the best props for plated dishes (such as raw ingredients, family photographs, calendars, and snoozing pets). Hemangi demonstrated how introducing human hands into the frame created a sense of “culture,” particularly if, *click*, adorned with red bangles or *mehendi* (henna)—both associated with brides or wives.

Section 3, “Lighting,” was the workshop’s biggest draw. Home kitchens, Hemangi explained to much agreement, were tucked away in the darkest corners of “our modern flats.” The trick was to buy a secondary gas burner and set up a shooting area by the living room window or balcony. The importance of natural lighting cannot be overstated in home chefs’ photographs. Many of my interlocutors devised scrappy strategies to capture sunlight. Several had reorganized or renovated their kitchens to move the stove closer to the window, while others had constructed makeshift setups in other parts of their home. One of them had refused to let her husband buy a different, larger apartment in Singapore because the lighting on their balcony was just right. The wealthiest among them, like Leela, had set up fully functional studio kitchens in their houses.

Hemangi moved on to technical tips. This section was dedicated to explaining the camera modes now available in “the regular smartphone that you use for everyday purposes.” This phrase bears unpacking. [Sadowski \(2020, 564\)](#) argues that the rentier relationship between users and platforms is predicated, in part, on “the Internet of Things—where mundane, formerly analogue objects (such as coffee machines or refrigerators) are turned into “smart” objects. When these objects are embedded with “sensors, software, and connectivity,” they become linked to monopolistic, data-seeking platforms, or the Internet of Landlords. In the phrase *regular, everyday smartphone*, Hemangi deploys her own characterization of how social life becomes embedded in digital networks via household objects. The “everyday smartphone” references the extent to which internet-enabled smartphones (and, by extension, internet services) have themselves become

essential, quotidian *reproductive* infrastructures, thus concretely connecting platforms and their global supply chains to workers and their households. In India, the world's second-largest user of smartphones (Mukhopadhyay and Mandal 2019), widespread state and corporate investment in digitization have meant that myriad essential daily transactions—social, political, and economic—can be, and are often encouraged to be, made via smartphone. Put differently, it is not the smartphone per se but its *everydayness*, its material and semiotic integration into the very fabric of daily reproduction, that makes platformized home-based piecework an expanding global labor relation.

In addition to their regular smartphones, Hemangi also encouraged aspirants to invest in skimmers and reflectors or, alternatively, showed us how to adapt household linens, scarves, and stoles for better interplays between light and shadow. The workshop ended with a practical demonstration by Hemangi and her “assistant” (her husband) on their balcony using their new iPhone 12. Hemangi’s food photography workshop exhibited, step by step, how creators’ infrastructures of reproduction double up as the means of global content production. In part, Hemangi emphasized how its authentically “home-made” appearance formed part of the discursive appeal of home chefs’ creator content. But she also illuminated the infrastructural investments made and the financial burdens shared by households to sustain working for the Internet of Landlords.

In a similar vein, Krish, a Mumbai-based full-time creator from a middle-class family, described the biggest factor in content creation as a different kind of rent—housing. “What you’re chasing is enough monetization to cover the cost of your flat, which is your studio and office,” he said. “So content creation works best for those who live with parents, or a spouse who covers rent, or can move to cheaper areas.” Krish had tried to rent a commercial studio kitchen in Mumbai for his YouTube shoots, but he eventually gave up because only his home kitchen made the endeavour financially feasible. Household start-ups—and therefore the creator economy itself—are subsidized by these free gifts of reproductive relations. Home kitchens become studios; children, nephews, and nieces offer tech support and on-screen antics without pay; paid domestic workers are asked to expand their household duties into odd jobs for creators—like Ajay *kaka*, Leela’s gardener-stagehand.

The ways in which creators’ domestic relations are drawn into their household start-ups are uneven and unequal, depending on who and where they are and, crucially, on algorithmic luck in the oversaturated online attention economy. For urban creators in dense cities, balconies and sunlit rooms make for

instrumental infrastructures. Many wealthy creators, like Leela or the Khandelwals, are able to invest in additional real estate, more home goods, fancier appliances, and studio kitchens to keep feeding their families and the content factory. Less well-to-do creators struggle if their domestic infrastructures are not made as conducive to content creation. One part-time creator, Arun, was at pains to capture clear photos in his tiny, dark studio. For rural content creators like Probal, natural lighting was less of a problem in the countryside. But Probal had to invest, at great personal cost, in bringing high-speed internet cables into his village, where most residents use only cheap smartphones and mobile data. To post a thirty-minute YouTube video three times a week, as content creators must do to drive engagement, Probal needed more reliable internet capabilities.

Indeed, while some home chefs dabbled in this work out of interest rather than financial need, most full-time creators found themselves increasingly locked into exhaustingly long workdays, unreliable payments, and ever-growing anxieties about how to cover their costs, let alone make money. Krish, for instance, noted that most months he had no idea whether he made money or not, and that he worked for “twenty-four hours a day, even in my dreams.” One aspiring YouTuber reportedly shut down her channel in 2024 after her investment of Rs 8 lakh (about \$10,000 USD) bore no returns because it could not maintain a steady audience. And Probal’s channel took a significant downturn, halving his followers, when a bout of COVID ran through his family, rendering them unable to post videos for three weeks. Increasingly irate, Probal would tell me over the phone one day: “Doing this is *prochur porishrom* [a huge amount of labor]. YouTube is our faceless boss and we are simply serving it with no protections. Who knows how long I can keep doing this.”

Thus, while content creation relies on the promise of being able to mediate and monetize “life itself,” the infrastructures that produce life itself are not a given—they must be bought, accrued, maintained, expanded, and re-animated with entrepreneurial meaning, as well as survive many games of algorithmic roulette, for the creator economy to proliferate.

CONCLUSION: CLASS STRUGGLE AND HOUSEHOLD START-UPS

Creator labor is not simply a relationship between workers and platforms. My provocation here is that platform work is born just as much out of its relationship to households—the material costs they bear as part of platforms’ supply chains, the ideological refashioning of home-based piecework into the household start-up, and the transformation of digital technologies themselves into

household infrastructures. Moreover, while Indian home chefs make visible the centrality of the household to these relations, they are not unique as a genre of content creators. Applying this framework beyond home chefs, we can see how households, as the shared means and relations of reproduction, prove instrumental to the creator economy, whether it is food, beauty, or gaming content; regardless of the form (say, TikToks, Reels, or podcasts); whether these arrangements include family, roommates, or nobody else; and whether creators work out of parents' basements, college dorms, or Hindu home kitchens. The household-industry form applies to many different platform industries and workers across difference—a “microworker” for Amazon’s MTurk service, a child who sells digital items in the videogame worlds of Roblox,²³ a platformized teletherapist whose living room is their home clinic, an OnlyFans sex worker livestreaming from their bedroom, or the Duchess of Sussex Meghan Markle who streams podcasts and cooking shows from her California mansion.

This historical endurance, and now expansion, of home-based piecework to such a wide-ranging group of workers—from rural Bengali YouTubers to American child gamers and members of the British royal family—holds critical lessons, both for how to correctly periodize capitalist expansion amid sensationalized narratives about new economies (or supposedly returning feudalism) and how to understand the current state of global class struggle.

First, rather than wage labor slowly colonizing the global periphery as part of capitalism’s unidirectional march, the emergence of the household start-up demonstrates the ongoing transformation of capitalist relations in several different directions: An extractive labor form that once dominated the Global South and was associated with poor women is currently expanding to the Global North, and upward through localized gender/caste/class/racial orders. As digital infrastructures become essential reproductive infrastructures, the private household everywhere is rapidly integrated into circuits of global production through home-based piecework. And even as some creators profit spectacularly, for millions of others, platformized household industry becomes part of an ever-increasing collection of piece-rate side gigs that workers across class, caste, race, gender, and location must take up amid ongoing crises of stable waged work, especially in media industries such as film, television, journalism, music, and publishing. Consequently, as subcontracted home-based piecework rises, the salaried wage labor form recedes as the distinguishing form of work in contemporary capitalism. Karl Marx (1979, 694) famously described the piece wage as “the most fruitful source of reductions in wages, and of frauds committed by the capitalists.” This *form* of payments, Marx argued, pushes workers into working

faster and for longer hours without the need for direct supervision, increases competition between workers, and enables the proliferation of predatory middlemen—all of these are outcomes evident in the accumulative and cut-throat world of content creation that I have described here. Indeed, one way to understand the creator economy is as the supply side of the attention economy—with more and more creators thus incentivized and disciplined by piece wages into producing the seemingly limitless content that proliferates across platforms, enabling data-driven capital accumulation to continue apace.

But *home*-based piecework, as its long history shows us, also atomizes workers spatially, socially, and politically. It sequesters workers within their households and social roles and therefore precludes the forms of organizing and collective struggle that can come from sharing a shop floor. And in the conjuncture of entrepreneurial citizenship, the refashioning of home-based piecework into the household start-up additionally stifles labor at an ideological level. The fantasy of socially differentiated business ownership makes broad-based class solidarity appear irrelevant or even antiquated, even as a larger swathe of once-secure workers and hobbyists are brought into piecework. Though elite creators may differ from poorer gig workers in wealth or social capital and could ostensibly opt out of this work, the creator economy appears only to be growing, rather than slowing down. Moreover, if class is understood as a relation to the means of production, even wealthier creators have more in common with an Uber driver in their structural relation to platforms, than they do with YouTube's CEO. But most home chefs, in seeing themselves as primarily proto-entrepreneurs that represent their own social niche, have struggled to imagine themselves as platformized workers across difference. The competitive imperatives of piecework and the reification of social identification central to content work together magnify these apparent differences, while mystifying the material similarity of gig workers' structural positions. Thus, while some creators have banded together to form entrepreneurial networks such as Indore's Recipe Association, and many describe the struggles and precarity of a creator career on their channels, few have come together to build collective leverage *against* platforms—a notable exception being a less-than-successful attempt by a German YouTuber to form a YouTubers' union in 2018.

In these ways, the creator economy weakens labor power on a global scale and makes uncertain the political future of creative work. Will the platformized drive for accumulation tend toward new crises that inadvertently open up liberatory possibilities for media labor? Could creator-owned platforms be on the horizon? As scholarly and popular accounts of digital economies grow, this article

offers a feminist methodological and analytical approach to better situate this emergent field—one that resists the hype-fueled exceptionalization of digital economies’ apparent novelty to instead render platforms’ production processes as at once strangely old and familiarly new.

ABSTRACT

The emergence of the so-called creator economy, the \$400 billion global industry of monetized online content creation, raises urgent questions about how platform economies articulate with social life. Critical theorists argue that platforms, as monopolistic digital intermediaries, act as rent-seeking landlords in between producers and consumers of commodities. Bringing a feminist, ethnographic lens to “the Internet of Landlords,” this article follows Indian food media creators on YouTube and Instagram, asking: Why is the Hindu home kitchen, a stubbornly guarded space of heterosexual caste-making, now opening for business? In unraveling this paradox, the essay argues that content creation’s production relations take the centuries-old labor form of household industry, refashioned in this conjuncture as the entrepreneurial “household start-up.” As the private household becomes a key locus of global production, this hype-fueled resignification of home-based piecework depoliticizes labor while reifying social difference. Such a reframing better clarifies the sociopolitical relations between platformization and class struggle. [creator economy; households; Marxist feminism; platform capitalism caste; food]

NOTES

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1. A visa type for dependents of U.S. work-visa holders, which disallows employment.
2. Cloud/ghost/dark kitchens are restaurants without a physical dining area that serve consumers via delivery apps.
3. This ethnography was conducted over five years, including a thirteen-month period between 2021 and 2022. Those described are composite renderings of multiple ethnographic encounters, an anonymization strategy used to protect easily traceable, public-facing interlocutors (Markham 2012).
4. Projections of this diffuse and highly speculative industry vary wildly. Compare, for instance, the figures provided in CB Insights, “How the 100B+ Creator Economy Is Going to Be Shaped by Big Tech,” 2021, <https://www.cbinsights.com/research/report/big-tech-famga-creator-economy/> and those in Deloitte, “Creator Empowerment

- and the Future of the Content Creator Economy,” 2024, accessed January 2, 2025 at <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/consulting/articles/content-creator-economy-growth-and-future-challenges.html>. Any figures provided here better characterize economic narratives than empirics.
5. From Meta’s 2021 report titled “Investing \$1 Billion in the Creator Economy.” Accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/creators/investing-one-billion-in-the-creator-community>
 6. See also Coherent Market Insights, “India Creator Economy Market Size to Surpass around US\$ 3,926.2 Million 2030, Recording a CAGR of 22%,” PR Newswire, March 8, 2024.
 7. Taking the industry term *influencers* at face value and virality or popularity as self-evidently representative of the larger system significantly limits scholarly analyses.
 8. Here, I join Melinda Cooper (2017, 16) in arguing that reproductive institutions (like households) stabilize and therefore “ensure the unequal distribution of wealth and income” in capitalist social systems.
 9. Compare Mankekar 1999 and Hall 2011 on the importance of conjunctural analyses, as well as ethnographic attunement to the conjunctural.
 10. In Marxist terms, these are typically taken to be “free gifts” of labor or nature.
 11. Households are historically and geographically varied (Smith, Wallerstein, and Evers 1984); the definition used here seeks to capture this variability.
 12. I return to this point in the conclusion.
 13. The process through which households’ pooled resources enable workers’ reproduction and subsidize production such that their labor power produces surplus for the global market is explained in detail in Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s (2025, 182) study of banana-growing peasant families in Dominica.
 14. While some scholars have tried to resituate platform capitalism as “techno-feudalism,” I follow Global South Marxists, anthropological political economy, world systems theorists, and other contemporary platform scholars who see these varied labor arrangements (peasant production, piecework) as undeniably interlinked with global circuits of capitalist accumulation. See Morozov 2016 for one detailed discussion of these debates.
 15. The domestic labor debates are often treated as a settled matter wherein domestic labor, care work, and unpaid labor are collapsed into the same analytic frame, rooted in a particular historical family unit in Euro-Western societies. However, the relationship between labor power, domestic production, class, and value are far more contingent and as such need historical specification.
 16. A dominant-caste group of merchants and business owners.
 17. Times News Network, “World Listens to India, It Can Be Global Skill Capital.” *Times of India*, January 10, 2023.
 18. Another of the BJP government’s flagship development projects.
 19. I use the term *Hindu home kitchen* not because all Hindus subscribe to these norms, but because they form the structuring principles that the wider Hindu caste order must navigate.
 20. This shift was intensified by the lockdowns during the pandemic.
 21. See Godrej Food Trends, “Food Trends Report 2021,” 2021, accessed January 2, 2025, <https://www.vikhrolicucina.com/resources/godrej-food-trends-report/godrej-food-trends-report-2021>; and Godrej Food Trends, “Food Trends Report 2022,” 2022, accessed January 2, 2025, <https://www.indulgexpress.com/food/2022/Aug/15/food-for-the-soul-the-many-culinary-cuisines-of-india-43111.html>
 22. This maintenance of given roles within the household forms a key part of the appeal of household industries—I venture that such a contradictory rearticulation also undergirds the so-called tradwife phenomenon in the United States.
 23. A full discussion of the widespread child labor involved in content creation is out of this article’s scope, but the mystification of home-based work forms part of the mechanism through which labor protections for children are circumvented in content creation.

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