

# Fandomization of online video or television in China

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs)**Anthony YH Fung** 

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, China

## Abstract

In this article, I explain a new media ecology for online television in which the online audience or fans and their participation play a stronger role in swaying the online video content or production. I call it fandomization of online television. Dependent on the number of online users and the viewership, online television platforms have to produce programs that align with the fans' discourse and emotions to maximize their viewership. This results in a fan-discourse-led production, as in the case of China's huge online video or television market. Based on my study of the top online television production company, Tencent Video, and its top television program, as well as ethnographic observations of their productions, I illustrate how Tencent Video manages fans by establishing a fan-based platform that works in tandem with its television platform. The dual television and fan-based platform of the television industry forms an interlocking web of the network of fans, their idols, and social media, with the consequences that social and political public discourse are highly synchronized in China's extremely controlled Internet.

## Keywords

China, fandomization, fans, new media ecology, online television, public discourse

In the past decade, television studies have demonstrated a rapid shift in research direction because of the irreversible trend of the digitalization of television and the surge in the influence of social media. At the end of the 1990s, with the advent of competing Internet content and the increased amount of time spent by audiences in the online environment, television companies hastened to produce, curate, and distribute web programs

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## Corresponding author:

Anthony YH Fung, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong.

Email: [anthonyfung@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:anthonyfung@cuhk.edu.hk)

and series. The television research agenda has been focused mainly on the degree to which the new form of digital television has spawned the legacy, norms, and format of the increasingly anarchic television medium (Christian, 2012). In the past 5–10 years, as social media have become so prominent that users have become used to sharing comments on TV programs while or after viewing them, TV scholars (e.g. Doughty et al., 2012; Lee and Andrejevic, 2014; Wilson, 2015) have studied the so-called ‘second screen’, that is, the laptop or mobile phone through which social blogging is combined with television viewing. In general, in these studies, it was concluded that message activity or interactions on the second screen revealed not only the effects of the audience’s online network and discourse on TV choices but also the complex motivations for incorporating apps or social media use in watching television programs (Doughty et al., 2012; Wilson, 2015). Inevitably, the need to study this online TV audience requires new methods, such as including the analysis of tweets by the TV audience (Harrington, 2014) and the audience’s consumption in the social networking site tvtag (Holanda et al., 2015). The findings of previous studies (e.g. Kelly, 2017) on audience measurement led to the conclusion that the audience’s use of social media or big data on digital platforms could serve as powerful real-time analytics for TV use. Moreover, the popularity of ‘television’ live-streaming in the form of subscription video on-demand services (SVOD) services, such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Video has opened a new area in television studies. The audience not only blogs online but also consumes television content online (e.g. Labato, 2017). Because all viewing activities are online, networks of TV audiences online, or TV fandom, including their discourses and practices, the technological features of TV platforms, their interactions with the audience, and their marketing strategies are all new factors conducive to TV viewing (Jenner, 2015). Spigel (2010) suggested that online TV viewing, mainly in the form of digital videos through mobile apps, smart phones, or computers, is a completely new form of the digital lifestyle that has been both practiced and imagined. Therefore, there is a need to re-theorize the interactions between user audiences and television companies and producers as well as other factors in this relationship, which might affect the marketing and distribution of content online.

The case of China is important in this endeavor because, in addition to its sheer audience size and market, its digital television industry is the fastest-growing worldwide. The pace of TV industry development in China exceeds major English-speaking markets, including the United States. The online TV market has already superseded the traditional TV market. China’s predominant state-owned television network has become the primary form of entertainment, mainly through mobile use. In China, there are 1.57 billion mobile phone users, a number that is larger than China’s population. The case of China, therefore, provides a model for other major world markets regarding the patterns of TV audience use and subscription in the epoch of the digitalization of TV.

## **Toward a fandom perspective in the study of online TV audiences**

Because of the *de facto* shift of audience activities online, television studies must address its relationship to Internet users to (re)discover the role of online fandom, which serves as a feedback mechanism in examining the ‘fringe’ of participation in television culture.

Hence, online television fan communities have been perceived as having a double function as the creators of an interesting show and as providers of instant feedback to producers (Andrejevic, 2008). From this perspective, television viewing has evolved primarily as a kind of mediated interactivity that shifts between online and television platforms. In their examination of audience activity in response to a television program, Costello and Moore (2007) found that interpretive fans – those who engage online with one another regarding television content – who stay online while watching television are a more sophisticated audience. This finding also implies that the online environment enables television fans to organize en masse as both resisters and shapers of programs, which is a new form of participatory television culture.

In other words, departing from previous television studies, in which television is considered at the heart of the inquiry and in which the audience is located on the margin of that center, in this study, the centrality of audience in the social media-enabled environment, or at least the co-centering of audience with television, is acknowledged in the line of inquiry. In this perspective, the online audience network is equivalent to online communities and to online TV fans that share and produce discourse in the Internet environment (Jenner, 2015). In this study, a fandom perspective is applied to understand the online TV audience. I theorize this new digital and online television ecology in relation to fandom as well as the discourse produced by fan communities, which play a central role in digital video content production and distribution. In the decade before the entire audience moved online, presuming the online TV fan discussions are sophisticated and meaningful, Costello and Moore (2007) adopted a fandom perspective to understand the popularity of television. In their second edition of *Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (Sandvoss et al., 2017: 1), findings suggested that in an Internet-animated world where streaming is commonplace in accessing television and other media, fandom is central to the understanding of all mediated experience, including audience participation, productivity, and textuality. Their findings echoed Jenkins' (2014) findings regarding fandom and new communication technologies, which showed that industries, such as the online TV industry, could work with, engage with, or embrace the participation and collaboration of fans in the digital environment.

Both present fans and future audiences will transition from watching traditional television to being users of YouTube, Netflix, other online video platforms, and television apps that are mainly viewed on digital mobile devices (Grainge, 2011). As Cunningham and Craig (2016) suggested, such platforms, which differ from traditional television's control of content and diversity, extend their capacity and services to work with textually productive fans to deliver their services. This transition has two implications. First, researchers must examine not only the content of online television but also how they produce context in response to fans. Audiences of online users who are productive and engaging now demand a screen culture in which content is fleeting, increasingly ubiquitous, and constantly updated. From the perspective of the television industry, online videos (in terms of both their production and distribution) survive in a very different media ecology, which is not an extension or an expansion of the previous media context. TV companies that operate online compete less with other television channels or stations than with a range of video content and other forms of digital entertainment online, including functional apps.

## Boom of the online television industry in China

Similar to audiences in many countries, in China, the audience has shifted from traditional television viewing to Internet television consumption. In the Chinese context, as the online television industry has significantly eroded the state-owned national and provincial television ratings, detailed reports that the authorities are losing popularity can by no means be publicly announced. In contrast, the national Chinese Central Television (CCTV) releases unverified aggregated data, claiming that they still take up over 30% of the terrestrial television viewership (33.72% in 2017), which amounted to 1.26 billion viewers (CCTV.com, 2017). However, marketing data have shown that, on average, in 2017, Chinese viewers only spent 32 minutes/day watching traditional television (Sohu, 2017). Regarding the development of the privately owned online television industry, more transparent data was subsequently released, showing that 74.1% of the 800 million online population often watched online videos for entertainment purposes (CNNIC, 2018). In the same year, another independent research company found that the online television audience had reached 570 million (iResearch, 2018). This statistic indirectly indicated that online viewing had become the mainstream in China.

The total revenues of the online television industry indicate an even better picture of success. In China, the entire online television market revenues increased from RMB13.59 billion in 2013 to RMB95.24 billion in 2017, and the annual rate of increase reached 50% (iResearch, 2018). Advertising revenues also increased from RMB9.8 billion in 2013 to RMB46.32 billion in 2017 (iResearch, 2018). Even if China's annual economic growth is excluded, this high rate of increase in the online market's advertising revenues indicates that the profitability of the traditional television market must be heavily decreased.

Table 1 presents the four most popular online video sites and television websites in China. Tencent Video is the market leader, followed by Aiqiyi, Mango TV, and Youku. Through downloaded apps or their websites, these four players deliver online television programs, mainly dramas and reality shows, to the audience in mainland China. The two most popular players have more than 80 million subscribers. In April 2019, Netflix had a worldwide subscriber base of 148.9 million (Statista, 2019). In China, the four major players attract approximately 30 million active users daily. In addition to advertising revenues, membership fees comprise the other major revenue source. In the fourth quarter of 2017, Tencent's and Aiqiyi's revenues from membership fees amounted to RMB2.2 and 1.93 billion, respectively, and their advertising revenues were 2.9 and RMB2.14 billion, respectively. Despite these high revenues, because of rising production costs and expensive copyright fees, with the exception of Mango TV, which earned a net profit of RMB573 million in 2017, the other three video and television websites recorded losses (New Drama Observer, 2018; *Yicai*, 2018).

## Methodology

The goal of this study is to understand online TV fandom, or the TV audience network, and the effects of consumption and other activities of online fandom on the production and distribution of TV programs and online videos. Therefore, it is necessary to reconsider the existing methodological framework that has been used to examine the television industry, which includes an analysis of markets and the industry based on data collected in-depth

**Table 1.** Popularity of the top four online video platforms in China (the table is compiled by the author and it is based on multiple data sources online).

Indicators of Popularity	Video platform	Tencent Video	Aiqiyi	Mango TV	Youko
Daily active users (2017) <sup>1</sup>		21.0657 million	4.5936 million	4.1 million	1.1475 million
App downloaded (2017)		746 million <sup>2</sup>	507 million <sup>2</sup>	337 million <sup>3</sup>	497 million <sup>2</sup>
Registered members (as of November 2018)		82 million <sup>4</sup>	80.87 million <sup>4</sup>	6 million <sup>5</sup>	50 million <sup>6</sup>
Total revenue					
(a) Membership		2.2 billion <sup>7</sup>	1.93 billion <sup>7</sup>	N/A	N/A
(b) Advertising (in RMB) (4th quarter of 2017)		2.7 billion <sup>7</sup>	2.14 billion <sup>7</sup>		

Sources: <sup>1</sup><https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1607741962559248101&wfr=spider&for=pc>; <sup>2</sup><https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1596082027517461389&wfr=spider&for=pc>; <sup>3</sup><https://470008.kuaizhan.com/96/0/p3999532321dd7f>; <sup>4</sup><https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1618816749056020090&wfr=spider&for=pc>; <sup>5</sup><http://dy.163.com/v2/article/detail/DQHTM63E05371BLB.html>; <sup>6</sup>[http://www.sohu.com/a/232834825\\_114819](http://www.sohu.com/a/232834825_114819); <sup>7</sup>[http://tech.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-03/25/content\\_35913073.htm](http://tech.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-03/25/content_35913073.htm).

interviews with key informants, such as producers and distributors. Thus, in this study, in addition to the existing methods used to investigate the media industry, the online media ecology is determined by examining audience, user, and fan behaviors, habits, and activities online as well as the operations of other online institutions and apps (e.g. fan-based social media and artist agencies) which mobilize users and promote online video viewing.

To examine the online video or television production and distribution process, I focus on Tencent Video, which is the market leader and the most popular online video and television platform (in the form of mobile apps) and social media operator in China. Two producers and two marketing managers at Tencent were interviewed during the study period from 2018 to 2019. Tencent has established the fan-based app Doki with the aim of boosting its fan viewership. The head of the Doki operation was also interviewed to gather information about the process of fans' consumption and sharing of content as well as their participation in discussions via fan-based platforms (fan platforms are distinct from program-based video platforms) or apps.

In addition to Tencent Video, which is an online television company, *Produce 101*, the most popular program on Tencent Video in 2018, is included in this case study to illustrate how fandom works through the new TV ecology. *Produce 101* is a Korean-franchised reality show involving a talent competition in which the online audience's 'self-picking' of the members of a girl band is the core theme. To understand the production process, in addition to interviewing the manager of *Produce 101*, a Chinese PhD student whose age was similar to the ages of the show's fans, who are mainly female, was trained and then sent to conduct ethnographic observations of the show, its fans, and the social media involved in circulating information, anecdotes, and news about the show's talented participants. During a 4-month period, the student researcher joined the circle of online discussion, attended the competition concert organized by Tencent, voted for her

favorite female performer, and interacted with her contact person from Tencent to understand the entire process. After the critical events, the researcher and I met and examined her notes about the observations she recorded from 30 May to 30 September 2018.

## Fan-discourse-led viewership

In contrast to traditional television, which depends on instant viewership, the popularity of online videos and television programs is assessed by both the number of instant views online at the first broadcast and the repeated views. The number of comments and ‘likes’ are also indirect indicators of popularity. Active online users are those who seek to follow their programs (if these have different episodes and seasons), and they have full autonomy in watching an entire show or a part of it. It is crucial for the online television industry to retain the audience during the entire show, convince them to leave favorable comments, and then lead them to watch another program. Hence, the number of monthly active users, which is the standard for assessing popularity, will increase.

These active users are usually called fans in the Internet context. Compared with the general television audience, fans have a fixed pattern of formation, their own communal culture, and their own discourse at different times. According to Tencent video producers that I interviewed, rather than developing an idea, assembling a quality production, and appealing to the mass audience on traditional television, online programs on a digital platform are produced according to the optimal formula for providing their target audience’s preferred content. Online televised content must be designed such that the potential discourse and narrative of an artist or a program will stand out, and online marketers can further amplify the discourse by using the vocabularies, themes, and narratives among fans. The fans’ discourse will be viral on social media, so they will be lured continuously to the online platform, which will maintain the hit rate and the number of daily active viewers. In belonging to a specific online community, fans share similar characteristics, such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, interests, and above all, their idolization of entertainment. Therefore, fan-discourse-led online videos are those in which the producers and marketers of online television programs have followed the fans’ interpretive activities regarding their idols and favorite celebrities. When a program is broadcast, it is a discursive formation of both it and its artists. At precise points, based on the assessment of online comments and public discourse, online video and television producers either must intervene in the discourse or change a program to maximize the number of fans of a certain program.

According to Jie Ma, head of the marketing team of *Produce 101*, the four main processes used in marketing their programs are as follows: producing the discourse and steering its direction; aiming the discourse at cultural and academic levels; identifying key opinion leaders who can contribute to the discourse; and inventing timely and discursive promotions (interview, 10 August 2018). It should be noted that all these strategies used in the online television industry do not concern writing a better script, devising an appealing program, achieving a higher quality of production, evaluating competitors, or formulating a blueprint for the industry. These strategies are focused on appraising the potential audience’s taste, suiting their agenda, orchestrating their emotions, and responding to the fans’ preferences. In the industry, producers strategize to manipulate the public

discourse by persuading media and social media to expunge unfavorable opinions or by convincing them to depict their programs in a favorable light. At the program level, they have to generate enough ‘noise’ so that a program will become the talk of the town. The strategies are much more diverse than those used in the traditional television industry, which focused on advertising. On the Internet, Tencent posts replies to VIP social media accounts, mainly those of celebrities and opinion leaders, on WeChat, which has a large number of followers, as well as on other online platforms (e.g. music media) to broaden online users’ awareness.

## **Mundane discourse as the denominator**

It is worth mentioning the nature of the discourse generated and circulated in China, where political control is uncompromisingly stringent, particularly over the media. In this context, public discourse must not refer to any social controversy or important political and social decisions. In addition, public discourse cannot be used to incite public actions or sentiments that could undermine the state’s legitimacy. The dilemma is that for media-initiated discourse to prompt users to share online and be known to the public offline, the issue cannot be trivial and the social implications cannot be minimal or imitable. Consequently, although mundane and insipid, to be politically safe, the discourse can originate only in and refer to a program, its actors, or artists. In the interviews, two Tencent Video producers offered an example. They talked about a protagonist named Ju Wang in the talent reality show *Produce 101*. Because of the strong legacy of Korean popular culture, in this Korean-franchised talent competition, female contestants are supposed to sing, dance, and act well, and in terms of appearance, those who are slim, White, and tall are regarded as female models. However, when Ju first appeared on the show, her appearance was unlike the other contestants. Sina Online, which is a major online media outlet, posted negative comments about her strong physical strong build and glowingly tanned skin (Neteast Entertainment, 2018). Ju was a non-conventional, non-conformist, and unapologetically determined candidate; thus, she was voted out three times by online users, and the judges initially criticized her ruthlessly. However, some users, mainly urban females, ‘rescued’ her by voting for her at the last minute, and thus saving her from being eliminated thrice.

Tencent Video explained the significance of the discourse about Ju that was generated online. Ju had simply become a heroine. The lesson was that a female can live a successful life without an impeccable career or a perfect marriage. A female consists of flesh and blood, and she experiences setbacks and failures. There are times when she is feeble and enervated. However, when she falls, she can stand up again for her dreams and aspirations. For online fans, the discussion framed Ju as a role model for any real Chinese urban female who confidently declares her own ‘financial independence’ and ‘spiritual independence’, claiming to be one of the few who can be herself (Guangdong Student Federation, 2018). Thus, online fans not only voted in sympathy for her but also her unrelenting persona echoed the dreams of the student population who said, ‘We don’t want to be conventionally defined [as] good kids’ (China Daily Online, 2018). In other words, when fans ‘picked’ her, they voted in favor of themselves or their incomplete selves. The official media outlet, the *Beijing Business News*, stated that Ju went beyond



the commercial logic of a female show: ‘She would not become another Angelababy (a top supermodel in China) or Yang Mo (a top female artist in China)’. She demonstrated that in the entertainment business, she had produced a ‘dramatic phenomenon’ (People.cn, 2018). The latter was a perfect anti-climactic discourse that increased Tencent Video’s viewership.

In practice, Tencent Video took advantage of Ju’s popularity and the related discourse to maximize its live online viewership of the program. In the program, the person at whom the camera was pointed affected the viewership every second. If Ju were given more time and was a continuing presence, she would have been more likely to be included among the 11 selected members in the small contest of 20 candidates and finally become one of the final 62 of 101 contestants that were eligible for public performance. Naturally, after the commercial consideration, Ju was in the spotlight of public discussion, and she was given more camera time to retain fans and boost the viewership. Of course, to give the public the appearance of a ‘balanced viewpoint’, as one producer of Tencent Video said, whenever it was possible, they not only featured Ju but also tried to include other contestants.

### **The case of *Produce 101* as a discourse**

The discourse-led approach to programming on online television does not result in a passive television strategy. When a program is first conceived, as Tencent Video producers emphasized, they must consider how many ‘hits’ it will receive, which are tied to the public discourse generated online and offline. In the case of *Produce 101*, which targets females aged 22–35 years, the entire show was created under the assumption that it was *the* discourse. According to Tencent Video, the official discourse is that female fans ‘grow up’ with their female idols. Thus, the discourse is not only about their idols; it permeates the everyday lives of fans.

Based on the format of the competition, where under-performing contestants are eliminated, the female contestants have to work assiduously to remain on the show, which is decided by the judges. Hence, the show and its contestants resemble urban females who have to struggle hard to survive in China’s large cities. Jie of Tencent Video said that this program was created for the ‘new female’ who endeavors to ‘break through the traditional baggage’ of women and housewives. In the ‘battle’ format – in which a protagonist who is on the verge of being eliminated can pick any contestant for a challenge – winning then allows the challenger to take the position of the one being challenged. Hence, the protagonist experiences the callous reality that Chinese urban women encounter and with which they empathize. According to Jie, *Produce 101* is an ‘epitome of the work conditions of women’. Female fans vote for their idol because they sympathize with the latter, who faces the same obstacles in daily life. This explains why the program has become a popular discourse in large cities when it is broadcast.

In terms of a long-term gender movement, the format exemplifies the story of a rising diva who represents the often state-celebrated heroic female model. Politically, if the discourse evolves into a mild version of the feminist movement, it could still be considered a benign project. In this case, the discourse, which is perfectly calculated, harmonizes with the official discourse on indulgence in work – despite social inequality



– without attributing it to the structural problems in the planned economy and governance. Thus, it only echoes the dream of women in society. It suffices to state that a television program in China should comply with the commercial logic and vie for viewership. A popular program without the authorities' endorsement would elicit their criticism, which has occurred in response to other television shows, such as *The Rap of China* in Aiqiyi (the second largest online television site). The State Administration for Press, Publications, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) declared that a rapper promoted a 'decadent' culture that perverts the youth (Hawkins, 2018).

## Relationship between audience and online television industry

Because the new online television industry articulates fandom, the relationship between the audience and television has been fundamentally transformed. The voice of fandom is exponentially amplified in the process because the fans' discourse is a key component in driving viewership for the industry. The rise of fandom has meant that the television industry and its production networks, including production companies, agencies, and artists, have lost much of its vantage point. Thus, the television industry has to adjust its values to bargain with its audience. At this juncture, television and the audience become truly interactive, not only channeling feedback and providing information but also creating a transactional relationship.

On one hand, online television sites have produced programs (e.g. *Produce 101*), and they own the exclusive right to release the tickets that are given only to active fans. After the first week of the 4-month ethnographic observations, which began on 30 May 2018, the student researcher demonstrated her active participation by mobilizing people to vote for Ju on the 500-member social media site of the physical fitness club in her university. She was then invited by some fan leaders to join four exclusive fan communities on major social media sites, including the communities in Tencent's Video, Tencent's Doki, Sina's Weibo (the second largest social media site after Tencent), and Oppo (the social media platform of the most popular mobile phone brand), to promote Ju. On 21 June, she was further informed that Tencent had awarded her a ticket to participate in the final show of *Produce 101* in the capacity of a member of the 'supporting group' in Hangzhou. Such tickets were not available to the public. Fans can only be given tickets by Tencent Video at its discretion. Subsequently, we found out that the price of a scalped ticket for the show was RMB3000. Such offline activities organized by Tencent and other fringe benefits for fans could be considered as bargaining chips that Tencent used to 'interact' with fans.

On the other hand, Tencent Video opened up platforms for fans to vote for their idols. In the initial participation of the student researcher, as a paying member, she could only cast 11 votes daily. Each vote had to be for a different idol, which made it impossible for a fan to support only her favorite idol. Subsequently, she was urged to join the VIP membership, from which Tencent earns direct income. Fans with VIP status can cast 121 votes per day, and all the votes can be for a single idol.

This twofold management of fans is a mode of interactive consumption in online television production. The observations revealed that fans with higher socioeconomic status directly paid voluntarily to support fans' activities online. An internal document that

circulated among the core fan leaders indicated that fans had fundraised RMB452,400 to support fandom activities for the final competition. The student fans, most of whom were born after 1995, contributed their labor by making publicity materials, organizing fans, and mobilizing other fans to vote for their idol. The more that this material or non-material provision increased, the higher the chances that Tencent Video would pay more attention to the selected idol. Needless to say, it influenced the votes for and the popularity of the idol.

## **Fan platforms as intermediaries for the online television industry**

According to Yuyan, the head of Tencent's Doki operation, except for reality shows that involve laypeople's participation, the program's overall connectivity to fans of different idols ultimately determined the program's popularity (interview, 16 November 2018 in Beijing). Thus, idol dramas produced locally for online television or imported from Japan and Korea and whose characters have a strong fan base, provide a predictable viewership for the video platform.

To connect effectively with all fans and capture the discursive formation between the video platform and the fans, Tencent set up a fan platform that functions similar to a fan club. The fan platform sends members private messages or news about their idols, distributes freebies (e.g. wallpaper for mobile phones), and organizes offline activities. Such online fan platforms ensure seamless connectivity to fans, mobilizing and animating them. Theoretically, these fan platforms could be perceived as cultural intermediaries between the audience and the video producers or the video platforms. Cultural intermediaries are active actors and institutions that serve to bridge the distance between production and consumption in creative industries (Maguire and Matthews, 2012). Some scholars (e.g. Negus, 2002) suggested that cultural intermediaries could further alienate production and consumption. In China, Aiqiyi's Paopao (i.e. bubble in Chinese) and Tencent's Doki (i.e. heartbeat in Japanese) are two fan platforms that are apps that operate in tandem with the two largest online video platforms in China.

Each of these two fan platforms has over 2000 fan communities. On one hand, communities are spaces for fans' cultural identification. Similar to any social media platform, fans actively engage with one another with the common goal of supporting their idols. On the other hand, fans are also compelled to 'sign in' on the site because their daily participation is converted into a score that indexes each idol's popularity or ranking. It is this affective and emotionally invested labor of the fans that drives this fan-based production culture (Gregg, 2009). The more frequent their participation in their community to support an idol, the higher the status that idol obtains in the overall ranking of all the idols on the fan platform. Although the fans' participation in escalating the conversation about their idol is a continuation of the discourse, the establishment of the fan platform is itself a creation of the discourse.

As mentioned by Yuyan, the members of Doki and similar fan platforms are young people in high school and university. The platforms show short exclusive videos in each fan community, some of which are semi-professional or simply productions made by handheld camcorders. Produced by the platform, these videos feature specific artists.

These can range from artists' private birthday parties to fan events planned and organized by the platforms. Different from conventional professional productions, the fans post their productions and live-streaming (e.g. Facebook live). It is as if each viewer-cum-producer holds a television license. There are also planned coproductions by fans and the artists' agencies or platforms about their artists within each community.

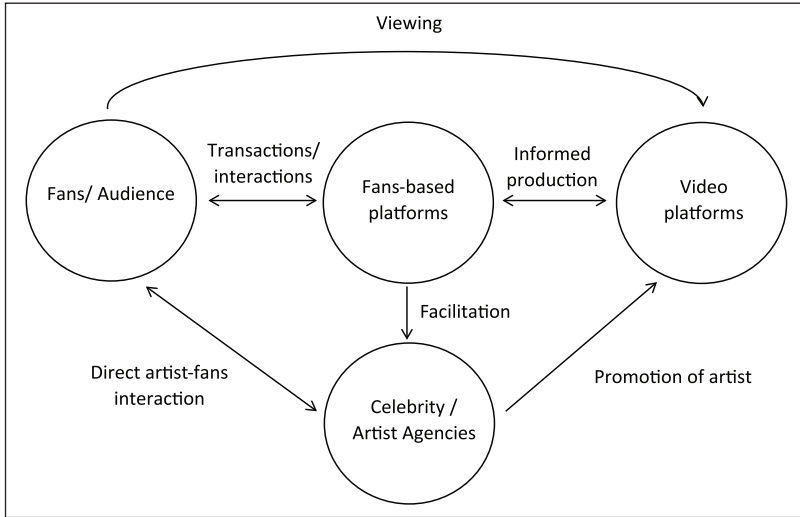
While television studies might have taken the concept of the active audience as far as they could (Livingstone, 2004), in this fan-led viewing, the act of 'actively' interpreting televised content currently remains passive. Fans' platform-based activity is truly participatory, as the fans themselves are the producers. In the case of Doki, although capitalism is at work in exploiting fans' immaterial labor (Hearn, 2010), unpaid yet effective platform-endorsed-cum-fans' productions empower the audience.

### **New video platform ecology**

As illustrated in the fandom formation and the fan discourse-driven viewership, online video and television production and distribution in the ecology of Internet platforms are not independent entity. With 558.83 million active users, the reason that Tencent Video's viewership is increasing exponentially is that it readily absorbs social media users from Tencent, which owns the two largest social media platforms in China: WeChat (1 billion monthly active users as of October 2018) and *qq* (669.8 million as of December 2018) (CIW Team, 2018). This formation of the mobile-cum-socially mediated society in China, in which communication, entertainment, payment, games, reading, and consumption are networked, requires a new interpretation of online video viewing. Online viewing is at the nexus of rhizome-like networked communication, which is in stark contrast to the unilateral communication of traditional television. The new ecology of online video platforms involves multiple paths of connection to online users and fan communities on various platforms and social media, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

Because the viewership of a new video platform depends on the fans' discourse about the artists featured on the platform's programs, unlike traditional television, online video producers could not create their own programs in the hope that the programs would be successful. Online video platforms have to either complement the fans' discourse, providing clear evidence of rankings and popularity, such as that on fan platforms (hence, they escalate the discourse in the production of the programs) or they attempt to divert the fans' discourse to other discourses on which other programs are based (interviews with Tencent video producers on 16 November 2018 in Beijing). The latter option is, of course, more costly and an uphill battle. In the former option, by simply articulating the fans' discourse in the content production, a video platform is based on an informed production strategy. Hence, a rough estimate of a program's popularity can be extrapolated from the popularity of the fan base. Therefore, the video platform can maximize its viewership.

A correlation exists between the chosen artists or celebrities and the fans' popular discourse and viewership on the video platform. This relationship is mediated by the fan platform, which serves to gage artists and celebrities in the eyes of the fans. Furthermore, the artists' or the celebrities' popularity and rankings are based on which video producers generate content. In a business alliance with the artists' agencies, a fan platform also



**Figure 1.** Relationships between fans/audience and video platforms in digital culture.

provides feedback to the agencies and facilitates the governance of the artists. In my case study, Yuyan (from Doki) said that big data on Doki would be given to the artists' agencies to facilitate the revision of their strategies and tactics in order to attract and retain fans and promote their artists.

The power relationship between the audience and the producer is reversed in the digital ecology. The audience is re-centered and empowered by multiple channels of interaction, whereas content production heavily depends on the audience's tastes and preferences. First, as mentioned earlier, fan platforms have to absorb fans as members and facilitate the community activities that are crystallized around the artists. Second, they directly interact with the artists or celebrities who are currently required to frequently display themselves to fans. For example, the performances or live concerts of singers constitute the core of their revenue, which is supported by the sales of CDs and online music (interview with Dou Zhang, CEO of Yinyutai, an agency for singer's ranking, 29 December 2016 in Beijing). For artists, public exposure gives the impression of higher popularity, which leads to higher television or online program fees (interview with Jessica Chen, founder, Easy Entertainment, a prominent artist agency, 31 March 2017 in Beijing).

## The fandomization of viewing

In the fandomization of video content, video viewership depends on the extent to which the platform operator mobilizes and manipulates fan viewers, who in turn watch the content online. Hence, the pattern of watching fundamentally from past experience because media-tization has transformed the social world, possibly including the role played by fan culture (Lundby, 2009). From the audience's perspective (Livingstone and Lunt, 2002), fans might still depend on television for conversation, challenging convention, and engaging in public

debate. However, fandomization is beyond the media orbit; fans on social media or other channels rejoice, feel agitated, or are motivated by their idols or artists. Online media sites develop sensitivity to fans' emotions and attempt to synchronize with them by following the audience discourse and producing video content accordingly. Of course, in this case, online video platforms are not passive. They attempt to establish their own fan platforms, initiate the discourse, prompt the fans' reactions, and influence the fans' decisions. Nonetheless, a video or a television platform must be aligned with the fans' emotions and use their discourse to produce programs. Thus, television manages fans' emotions.

## **Conclusion: the technologization of everyday life**

In focusing on the digitalizing television industry in China, this study has theorized the relationship between the TV audience and the television industry from a fandom-based perspective. Immersed in the digital space, consuming and producing, the experience and culture of audiences and fans are no longer directly mediated by a medium; instead, online interactions occur among fans' discursive formation, digital television platforms, and other parties (e.g. celebrities, artists, and marketing agencies). The mediated culture then inspires, shapes, or restrains the online content that fans consume. The future of the traditional TV market does not appear promising because of the prevalence of digital platforms (Maheshwari and Koblin, 2018), the decline in traditional television ratings, and sluggish spending on advertisements (Molla, 2018). It is possible that the media ecology represented in the case of China could characterize the digitalization of television worldwide.

The phenomenon of the fandomization of viewing, which returns 'power' to TV fans and viewers, has strong implications for both television production and society. First, fans determine how and what the TV industry could and should produce. Second, because fans are riveted to their computer screens or increasingly, the screens on their mobile devices, television must compete with all Internet content to survive. It must yield to fans' new desires, interests, and experiences by devising television content, formats, and marketing strategies that might not have existed previously. If it is conceived optimistically, fans' continual integration of their daily lives with mobile technology will lead to the rejuvenation of audiovisual content, which will relate to the young audience's wants, interests, and agendas.

However, the fact that TV users select programs that are relevant to them might result in the popularization of content, which might restrict its diversity. The question then in this digital age is whether online video and television production in general could remain independent of the market and public opinion and whether mass media are supposed to assume the role of surveillance of society and the government, similar to that of traditional television. For the audience, the question is whether the technologization of everyday life through online video production and fandom would lead to greater autonomy. In line with the poststructuralist argument that technologization potentially gives rise to decentralizing the power center, in the new media ecology, all digital platforms and institutions, including video sites, fan platforms, and celebrity agencies, form an interlocking network, in which fans' emotions are synchronized and all parties in the digital media ecology precipitate in monitoring dissenting behaviors, discordant discourses, and alternative tastes.

Thus, in the case of China, regardless of whether the authorities exercise censorship or in the case of capitalist states, regardless of whether the media promote a neoliberal agenda, networked fan platforms in conjunction with television apps (in addition to entertainment and facilitating the effectiveness of life routines) function to serve as populist vehicles to coalesce, rather than broaden, opinions and views, and to control, rather than liberate, individuals in the sphere of fandom.

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## ORCID iD

Anthony YH Fung  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5760-9816>

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